Secrets of Bird Life

H. A. Gilbert and Arthur Brook

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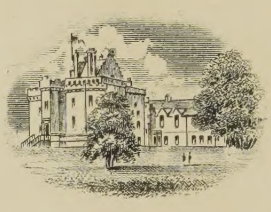

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SECRETS OF BIRD LIFE

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Buzzard and young with mole.

Frontispiece.

SECRETS OF BIRD LIFE

BY

H. A. GILBERT

AND

ARTHUR BROOK

WITH FORTY-ONE PHOTOGRAPHS

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To the Memory of

DAVID EDMONDES OWEN

AND

ALFRED GWYNNE VAUGHAN

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INTRODUCTION

THESE lines are written in the hope that they will interest that large body of persons who know little or nothing about birds. We propose to try and describe the birds as we have seen them in such a way as to make non-bird-lovers realise what interesting things they can see if they will only try. If such persons will only look up, they will find a whole new universe opens up before them which will give an added interest to every country walk wherever they may be.

We are quite aware that individual birds of the same species vary enormously in their behaviour. Difficult as it is, we purpose to try and give a good general idea of such birds as are here portrayed, but we do not pretend that all birds of the same species will behave in any particular manner as described. Some will certainly vary in their behaviour.

It may sound exaggerated if we describe bird photography as the best sport in the world, but that is how we view it, and it is from that angle that we propose to treat the subject. It has every-

thing necessary for a real field sport, knowledge, skill, patience, endurance, and that small spice of danger which must be present in every sport. The possibility of danger arises from the necessity of tree and cliff work. Egg collecting is a magnificent sport without a doubt, and appeals to many rightly or wrongly, but bird photography is far more difficult and, we claim, vastly more interesting. A collection of eggs is seldom interesting, particularly when it consists of mere masses of egg shells without anything of note attached to them. Moreover, many collectors seem to get bitten with a rage for mere possession, and obtain their eggs by hook or by crook in any way they can. Wherever we go in any special area for birds we are almost invariably greeted by some tattered ragamuffin, who is generally propping up the wall of a public house waiting for someone to test his absorbtive powers. We find that he wants to sell us eggs, and as a testimony of his prowess he generally gives us the names of various collectors whom he works for. The names are always the same and are very few in number. To such an individual the sight of a rare and beautiful bird such as a chough or a crossbill means nothing. When he sees them they represent no more to him than a potential source of so much beer, and he will never hold his hands while money can be obtained

for their eggs. What enjoyment the principals get out of the eggs such miserable objects obtain for them we cannot imagine.

Even when the collectors have got eggs in this vicarious manner they cannot trust the data given them. If a clutch of six or seven is worth more than a clutch of five, it is certain the seller will make up a clutch to suit the market if he can. A sufficient reward would quickly produce anything, even a cuckoo's egg in a guillemot's or cormorant's nest, with data all complete for the buyer to swallow. We once heard a most illuminating conversation between two professional eggers as to which collectors it was safe to impose upon. It would have been educative to those whose names were mentioned had they been there to listen. Buying eggs is about as sporting an act as filling one's house with deer heads—shot by poachers. Money destroys all sports—the outstanding example being horse racing.

At any rate, the photographer must do his own work, and cannot pay someone to do it for him. He has all the fun of watching the bird and generally of finding the nest for himself. And when he has got a really good series of photographs he has something which seems to us, at any rate, to be vastly more interesting than the eggs. I notice that nearly all photographers side with " protectionists "

and vilify all egg collectors. Of course, collectors are a nuisance to the photographer. Nothing is more annoying than to find a nest which you have been waiting to photograph has been harried. However, we realise that we must take our chance. We understand full well that photography and egging do not go together, but that if the fashionable egging areas are avoided there is room for all. It seems to us there are very few mischievous and harmful egg collectors in this country. For such we have nothing but pity and contempt. Egg collecting, as practised by most collectors, does not do the amount of harm that it is popularly supposed to do, even if it does no good. The sale and purchase of eggs seems to us to be a vile trade. Commercialism in egg collecting is abominable and the root of all evil. We are glad to notice that the new Act, if passed, will put a stop to a great deal of the mischief. However, it must be admitted that it is not the collector but the game preserver who is wiping out some of our most interesting birds, together with that type of idiot, common in a past generation and happily much rarer now, who thought he was doing a glorious deed whenever he shot a rare bird. At any rate, they no longer rush into print and chronicle their crimes with pride. We think it is the gun and not the egg drill and blowpipe of the collector which has caused the

extinction and rarity of many birds in this country—for instance, the osprey.

We can only say that we have found egg collectors as a body to be possessed of more knowledge than the protectionists, and also to be reasonable beings. Several of them have given us much help and have left many a nest alone at our request. Most of them appear to be genuine bird lovers. We have no quarrel with egg collectors as a whole. The few who bring discredit on the rest are unpleasant people, and for them we hold no brief.

We fear that the above statements will bring the wrath of the extreme protectionists down on us; and yet we have the temerity to claim to be protectionists ourselves. We have, at any rate, done all we can to protect rare birds all our lives.

We do not mean to quarrel with either side; but we cannot help remarking that certain extreme protectionists possess large collections of British birds' eggs obtained in the past, and others manage to shoot a large number of birds on every migration "for scientific purposes." This sort of protectionist are the bad men of the other extreme. Although they may destroy hundreds of birds themselves merely for the purpose of examining their skins, they abuse the egg collector.

They compound for sins they are inclined to by damning those they have no mind to. By behaving as they do they put a good weapon into the hands of their opponents; but it is obvious that two blacks do not make one white. It is a great pity that both sides in this everlasting dispute do not try to see the view point of the other. As things are, the great mass of bird lovers, and among bird lovers we include the vast majority of egg collectors, waste their energies in continual useless bickering and warfare in the Press and elsewhere. The older societies seem to have lost touch with conditions as they are, and to be doing little useful work.

Among many protectionists we fear mere sentiment often takes the place of knowledge. At the present moment the tendency among them seems to be to concentrate on protecting sea birds, such as terns, etc., of which we possess untold thousands, and to neglect rare birds which really do require protection. An instance of this is the golden eagle. This fine bird has been enduring great persecution in the last few years, and has decreased greatly, even if it is in no immediate danger of extinction. Every man's hand seems to be against it, and its fate appears to be bound up with that of the deer forest in Scotland. As these

wild areas decrease, so will the golden eagle. It seems to us that the case of this bird and others like it require careful attention, and yet we hear little about it from the people who should be looking after its interests, while large sums are spent on sea bird colonies, which need very little protection indeed.

We have already said that in our opinion game preservers have destroyed many of the birds which formerly lived among us. We think that this is indisputable, but we wish to make it clear that we do not blame the gamekeeper. We have many friends among this fine body of men. Their duty to their employers is to use every means they can to increase the stock of game ; as far as they are concerned they are bound to destroy many birds, and they, and they only, are responsible for the devastation which has taken place and is taking place now. Many raptorial birds on the black list do very little damage, and for no raptorial bird do we plead to the extent that it should be allowed to increase to vast numbers. All we ask landowners is at least to consider what they are doing, and to plead that the sight of a buzzard or two wheeling in the sky is a fine sight. Even if they will not believe us in saying that the buzzard and many other such birds do little or no harm, could they not

realise that the sight of these birds will give pleasure to thousands? And can they not give orders that a reasonable number should be allowed to live at peace?

We propose to say very little about the actual manner in which these photographs were obtained. The photographer was hidden close to the nest, but the actual hiding of him was neither difficult nor particularly interesting. The basis of the hide is that the photographer and his camera* are enclosed in a green cloth and portions of the surrounding landscape are tied on and round him for concealment. If care and common sense are employed, a good and sufficient hide can be built up in a few moments for even the shyest bird. Stuffy and cramped it may be. Many people will think bird photography under these conditions is a curious taste for others to indulge in, particularly when they read of the wait of thirteen hours we endured for the peregrine. We can only say that if they will but try they will find it most exciting. One crowded moment of glorious life is worth an age of waiting. Disappointments they will have

* We have frequently been asked what camera we use, so it would perhaps be helpful to say that we have always used a Thornton-Pickard.

in plenty. They will find rare ground nesting birds' nests after endless difficulties, and on going to photograph them, they will find a cow has sat on one, children have robbed another, mice have eaten the eggs in a third, and so on, and yet we have never been accompanied on an expedition by a scoffer and unbeliever who did not get as keen as ourselves eventually.

Lastly, many of our watchings and wanderings are in such splendid country. The views we see are sufficient reward, even if we obtain no photograph. Many of the birds we photograph have been banished by man's unkindness into the wilderness, and into the wilderness we must follow them. We go into vast stretches of hillside and moorland where everything is beautiful and untouched, where not even man is present to be vile !

It is a pity that we alone among the nations have no national reserve. Crowded as we are, we still possess vast empty spaces that are not occupied by humanity, and never will be occupied. For a trifling sum of money the nation could obtain a reserve where birds and animals, now on the verge of extinction, could live at peace for ever without disturbance, to be a joy and an interest to those who would go in search of them. Such people are increasing in numbers and becoming more

vocal, and let us hope something will eventually be done.

And now we have said enough on a debatable subject, and must get on to our main topic. We do not pretend to be bird experts, and do not write for such, but we will try and describe to the reader what we have seen and done. It is time we began, so here goes !

BISHOPSTONE, HEREFORD,
September 15th, 1924.

SECRETS OF BIRD LIFE

CHAPTER I

THE GREENSHANK AND THE DUNLIN

OUR adventure with the greenshank was one of the most enjoyable we have ever had. We scored a triumphant success and converted an unbeliever. Now this unbeliever (who is referred to in future as the U.B.) is a magnificent field naturalist, but a somewhat liverish old gentleman, and in the past has regarded all bird literature as " tripe," and bird photography as the veriest foolishness, and the work of stupid idiots. When we set out to deal with the greenshank, we knew practically nothing of the bird on its breeding grounds, and had only seen it occasionally on migration on the coast and in Norway late in summer. From people who had tried to find the nest we were told that the bird was very shy and possessed of devilish cunning and seldom gave the position of its nest away, and this certainly is true. It does not haunt its nesting site like the plovers or most ground nesting birds. It feeds anywhere up to three or four miles away from its nest, and sits until you tread on it. We were told that if you watched the bird nothing

happened, save that possibly after watching it for five or six hours it would probably go to sleep or fly away out of sight of the best of field-glasses, and that although it was generally distributed in Northern Scotland, it was sparsely so, five or six pairs to 30,000 acres.

The U.B., however, we knew, was an expert at greenshanks, and so one day we turned up in his country and told him we wanted a greenshank to deal with. He merely remarked that bird photographers were all adjective fools, and that even if he found one we would not likely get a natural photograph. However, he kindly consented to act as bear-leader, and took us many miles into a barren-looking valley. The slopes to each side were covered with stones and rocks of all shapes and sizes, some as big as footballs, others quite as large as cottages. The only vegetation was short, stunted heather, moss and lichen, and the bottom of the valley was made up of peat bog, full of ruts and very wet. A whole division could have hidden amongst the peat bogs, guns, generals, transport and all, so that a greenshank would not have much difficulty in doing so—a mere expanse of absolute desolation, but typical greenshank country, so the U.B. said.

We walked up to a stony ridge and were told that a greenshank had been seen there, and that

possibly there was a nest anywhere within a mile of us. What happened will probably astonish those unlucky individuals who have been out for several seasons and worked hard without success.

We began to search, and within ten minutes the U.B. was observed walking delicately towards us and obviously full of suppressed excitement. He looked as if he had seen at least a mammoth or a tiger or two approaching. Without a word we followed him up to where he had left his stick in the ground, and there, to our intense joy, was her ladyship, sitting right in front of us. There was no suggestion of crouching on her part, she sat boldly with her head up close to a large stone in short heather, and remained absolutely motionless while we all examined her closely at a distance of about six yards. Even though the heather was very short, she was by no means obvious. One of us admitted that he had passed within ten yards of her. The plumage when the white rump is concealed by the wings is distinctly protective, and the U.B. described her as looking like a bit of dead stick. The brown feathers on the back make her look rather like a big moth, and it was only the upright carriage of the head and her long beak which caught the eye at all. We had not got the silent shutter camera with us at the time, but Brook walked up within a few

feet of her and took a snap of her on the nest. At the click of the exposure she jumped, and then the silence of the hillside was broken by a series of appalling shrieks as the bird flew round us. This is typical of the greenshank. When she is pushed off the nest or has young she is as noisy as she was silent before, and advertises the fact to the whole parish. The noise reminded us of the greenshank we had found with young in Norway years ago, which sat on the top of a spruce tree and yelled at us for the space of three hours by the clock. To our surprise we saw that she had not laid her full clutch and was not sitting. She was merely covering her three eggs, which were quite cold to the touch. We therefore packed up hurriedly and departed as quickly as possible to let her settle down. The fun, however, was only just beginning; in fact, we were to see and hear two more typical greenshank performances that day. We went on about half a mile and sat down to take stock of the country. There it was—typical greenshank ground, thousands of acres, even square miles of it, and in that large area we knew there was one more nest at least, and possibly two. We could not search the whole of it, and the question was where and how to begin.

It is all very well people saying that they know "what sort of ground to look on," but in our short

experience we saw and heard of greenshanks' nests on all types of ground—from wet peat bogs to stony hillside—including burnt patches of heather, and it seems to us that if one sets out on that principle only you will have to search nearly the whole of Northern Scotland on the look-out for a nest.

Nesting greenshanks, however, do make one mistake, shy and cunning as they are, and that is when they return to the nest after feeding, or to relieve their mate (for there is no doubt that both sexes share in incubation), they make a most distinctive nesting note and make it loudly. This noise has been described in various ways. Mr. Seton Gordon describes it as " calling repeatedly with short, sharp, whistling cries " (*Wanderings of a Naturalist*, p. 4). An eminent field naturalist, Mr. N. Gilroy, has described it as saying " chook, chook " repeatedly, and this sound very nearly describes the note. To us it sounded like a loud liquid whistling " chook, chook, chook " very quickly repeated, and the bird may make the note for any period lasting from ten seconds to two or three minutes, and it ceases calling when it starts to run on to the eggs. While this nesting note is *always* made before the bird runs on to the nest, it is sometimes *also* made on other occasions as well—even in the air—but seldom apparently off its nesting area. When the bird

makes the note while flying it only does so in short bursts, and then the note sounds more like "tick, tick, tick" than "chook, chook." The note is so loud that you can hear it a long way off; in the case of one nest which had been found we heard it clearly 1,000 yards or more away, when the bird returned. Anyhow, it is a most cheering sound to hear if you wish to find a nest—and we were shortly to hear it.

As we were sitting and waiting we suddenly heard a greenshank coming up the valley making its loud, cheerful, care-free call "chuwee, chuwee, chuwee," and we saw it coming high overhead. It then made its regular nuptial flight, flying all over the valley calling and trilling in ecstasy, rising and falling as it went, until at last, after about three or four minutes, it dropped to the ground about a mile away.* This was the first performance we were

* Our friend Mr. William Marshall has described this event to me as follows: "To witness the greenshank's nuptial flight and hear its love song are pleasures enjoyed by few naturalists. The bird rises quickly from the ground, and with rapid, powerful flight ascends to a considerable height, and rises and falls while going through extraordinary evolutions. During these aerial stunts it utters its loud, passionate mating or love song, which is, of course, quite distinct from the usual call. At the close of the exhibition the greenshank descends suddenly, and when near the earth skims along in the manner of the curlew and other waders. After seeing the greenshank's display one thinks the tumbling antics of the raven tame indeed."

to see, and lucky we were to see it. Immediately this was over another greenshank arrived up the valley flying low, and disappeared over a low mound about 300 yards away. We decided to go up to this mound and see what was going on beyond it. We had only gone a short distance when we nearly trod on a golden plover which was sitting on four apparently fresh eggs, and whilst we were examining the nest we suddenly heard the nesting note of the greenshank, close to us, and evidently just over the mound. Our luck was in !

It is curious how difficult it is to tell exactly where the sound comes from when you cannot see the bird. We rushed up to the ridge as quickly as we could go, and stalked our way up until we could get a view of the area where the bird was calling. We could not get a sight of the bird, and as the noise had been going on for some time and it was bound to stop very soon one of us dashed forward to flush her (the bird). This was, of course, in order to get an idea whereabouts the nest was situated, because once the noise stops and the bird goes on the nest in silence you cannot move her again, and may possibly have only a very general idea where she was calling. The bird was rather farther off than we expected, about 300 yards away, and we began to search the area carefully, and this we did for over

an hour without any success whatever. The only thing that happened was that another wretched golden plover was practically kicked off its nest by the party. This bird was sitting on two highly-incubated eggs, while a third egg was lying in water about six inches from the nest.

Having failed to find by searching, we decided to hide one of the party while the other two went on; and this we did, hiding him where he could overlook the area and covering him with heather very carefully. Very shortly after he was well hidden, and while all three of us were still in the nesting area the greenshank was heard returning, and so the two who were in the open dived for shelter under a peat hag, covering themselves as quickly as possible with such heather as they could pull. Not only one but both greenshanks appeared. The first pitched down close to where the nesting note had been heard first, but out of sight of the watcher in a slight dip. This bird gave a short performance of the nesting note, and then stopped. It was never seen again, and was therefore presumed to have run on the nest unseen. The second bird had evidently seen some of the party before they had hidden, for it went round and round and obviously was looking for them, screaming and giving short bursts of the nesting note as it flew. Two or three

times it pitched and relapsed into silence, and after five or ten minutes it would rise again and continue its search for its enemies. Its perseverance in this search showed us very clearly what a cunning bird the greenshank is when near the nest, and certainly was an eye-opener to us. Finally, after about three quarters of an hour the bird evidently spotted the party in concealment and flew away. We got up and returned to the place where the first bird had disappeared, and searched and found nothing! As a matter of fact this nest was never found. It was getting late and we had a long way to go, so we gave up and set out for home. On the way back the U.B. lifted up his voice and told us that without a doubt we were two of the luckiest individuals who had ever set out after greenshanks' nests, and that we had seen more in a few hours then many searchers ever saw in a season. There still remained the fun of getting a photograph, and so we returned to the ground in a week's time to see how our nest was getting on. On this occasion the keeper came with us to show us a dunlin's nest he had found on the ground. He had also some time before found a greenshank's nest with three eggs, apparently deserted, some distance up the valley, and we were going to look over this part of the ground again.

When we got up to the nest that had already

been discovered the bird rose while we were still quite a long way off and flew away absolutely silently. This was rather remarkable behaviour and suited us admirably. There is as a rule nothing more aggravating than to have to flush a bird off the nest in order to make the hide. The flushing always seems to upset its nerves, and we are always delighted to see a bird which usually sits close leave the nest of its own accord. We found the nest contained the usual full clutch of four eggs, and decided to try and get a photograph then and there. The U.B., of course, derided the mere idea, and indeed we were rather doubtful ourselves. We had had difficulty with a redshank the day before, and were quite ready to believe that all the " shanks " were difficult. This redshank had made its nest in thick heather about six inches high, and we had to do a bit of " gardening " and peg down the heather so that a view of the nest could be obtained. When Brook got in the hide the bird came back directly and allowed itself to be photographed once. It evidently did not like the " gardening," and flew up and perched on the top of the hide and shouted its disapproval into Brook's left ear for twenty minutes. However, we are digressing, and must return to the greenshank.

We put Brook into the best hide I have ever

Arthur Brook.

He is sitting behind the hide from which the first greenshank photograph was taken.

Facing page 30.

seen. Brook sat on a low stone, and we covered him with thin sheets of peat covered with heather and lichen which we peeled off the surrounding rocks, and tied him in like a trussed fowl. When the keeper finally sprinkled the hide with powdered lichen the effect was magnificent, and it looked as if a largish rock had suddenly grown up close to the nest. Leaving Brook in this extremely damp and confined situation, the rest of the party went on to the dunlin's nest, which was about a mile away, and put a dummy hide over it, consisting of a heap of heather. The keeper and the U.B. then went on to look at the greenshank's nest which had been found by the former.

We will now return to the photographer. He had seldom been more uncomfortable—the sheets of peat which made up the hide started to drip down his back, and the hide was stuffy and confined. Nothing happened for ten minutes, when the greenshank came back calling, and evidently pitched somewhere in the neighbourhood unseen. Twenty-one minutes after the party had left the nesting note began very close to the nest, and continued for a couple of minutes, when it suddenly ceased. A few seconds after that the greenshank appeared from the right and walked straight up to the eggs. It stood over them for a brief second, during which

the plate was touched off, and sat down. The hide was so small and confined that there was bound to be movement visible from the outside when the plate was being changed, and the greenshank became suspicious and marched off the eggs. It did not return for some time, but kept perambulating about some ten to fifteen yards away on the far side of the nest. Finally it plucked up courage, and though evidently still full of suspicion, it walked slowly up to the nest, and as it came into focus a second plate was silently exposed. The bird carried on and started sitting. Brook decided not to try and change the plate, but to remain absolutely still and watch the bird on the nest until relief came. It was obvious he could not change the plate without a slight movement showing, and he feared the effect on a suspicious bird. And so he sat for an hour enduring great discomfort until his relief arrived.

The bird left the nest silently as soon as it saw the writer approaching, and Brook heaved a sigh of relief. He was wet through and aching in every limb, and very glad to get outside to stretch his legs. The camera was taken out and the hide was rebuilt and left for a further sitting if necessary. We then left, and went down into the valley to find the rest of the party.

Suddenly we heard the agonised shrieks of a

Greenshank at nest.

Facing page 32.

greenshank which had obviously been booted off its nest by someone or other. We glassed the country in that direction, and spotted the keeper standing still a long way off on the opposite side of the valley, while the U.B. was running up to him. We watched them bend down and examine something, and then to our joy they began to put up a dummy hide of stones and heather. Full of content, we partook of an overdue lunch, and then went on to the dunlin's nest.

Brook got into the tent and was left hidden; but a mere dunlin did not seem very exciting after a greenshank, and Brook only stayed a very short time, during which he got one photograph. When he came out the whole party got together again, and we discovered what had happened whilst we had been separated. It appears that the U.B. and the keeper had gone to look at the nest found by the latter, and found it obviously deserted and the three eggs quite cold. A severe snowstorm had swept the country three weeks before, and there is no doubt that all the birds which had had nests at that time had abandoned them and begun again. That snowstorm must have destroyed more nests in a day than the collectors will find in twenty years. It was odds on, therefore, that there was another new nest close by, and the keeper had already had

a good search for it. Another search began, and after a long time it struck the keeper that the only area which had not been thoroughly investigated was the most unlikely, a newly-burnt patch of rather old heather, a bare blackened bit of ground with dead stalks of heather sticking up all over it. As he walked down his eye suddenly caught sight of a greenshank's egg lying on the ground, and on going up to look at this he found it had evidently tumbled out of an empty scratching which was made on top of a rock. He got no farther, for the next instant a greenshank got off a nest a few yards away and began the screeching that has already been described. This nest contained two eggs only, evidently highly incubated. All the six eggs found on this bit of ground had obviously been laid by the same bird, for they were of the same type and remarkable eggs—covered with great red blotches. It rather amused us to think that if they had been picked up by some egg-dealing Scotchman some of those who like collecting eggs in the seclusion of their houses—by purchase—would have very shortly acquired a really magnificent set of four, while two would have been disposed of to the London dealers.

We did no more that day, but set off home, arriving at 11 p.m. tired but triumphant. The

U.B. was asked what he thought about bird photography, and merely grunted. This was an advance on his previous state of mind. We noticed that he showed great anxiety as to results when the two negatives were developed. As a matter of fact, he is now one of our keenest helpers, and has been out with us on many occasions.

We had now two nests on which to try further experiments. The first bird was obviously a shy brute, and would never be an easy subject, and so we decided to have a day's rest and to go up the day after to try our luck both with still photographs and cinematograph.

On starting the weather did not look too promising, but we toiled on with all the gear, and the keeper, good fellow that he was, came with us to see the fun. He did more than that. He carried a man's load without turning a hair, and a cinematograph camera and tripod is a most tiring object to carry over Scotch moorland. When we were well on our way it began to rain, and did not stop for six hours. However, we went on, and by the time we got to the nest we were soaked to the skin. The bird sat and looked at us for quite a long time, and then left without the usual amount of demonstration. We built up a hide of heather and left Brook installed in it. Very soon it was obvious that we had a really good

subject to deal with. The bird came back within five minutes, and Brook got all the film he wanted within a quarter of an hour. The bird took no notice of the sewing-machine noise of the cinematograph camera save to make a brief check in its advance when Brook first began to turn the handle. It is curious that on this occasion only did the bird return without making its nesting note. It walked up to the nest in absolute silence. On every one of the other occasions on which we have been near when the greenshank returned to a nest it made the " chooking " noise.

We had originally intended to make a very prolonged session in order to try and get a photograph of the relief of the sitting bird by its mate; but after " sticking " it for three hours in the rain our clothes were reduced to pulp, and everyone was so cold and chilled that it was decided to abandon the proceedings. Brook had got seven good negatives for certain, and we were well content. The U.B. admitted there was something in bird photography, and asked us to come up again another year and have a further attempt, particularly to try and get photographic proof that both sexes of the greenshank incubate. And so ended a very interesting and enjoyable trip. The greenshank is certainly a most delightful bird, and well worth cultivating. It is

The second Greenshank's nest in a patch of burnt heather.

"And there was her ladyship sitting."

Facing page 36.

curious that very little seems to be known about the bird even now, and that it is only of late years that much interest has been taken in its habits. Many of the statements about it appear to be slightly inaccurate and it seems a very difficult bird to generalise about. One reads statements as follows : " The nest is always close to some mark—a stone on open moor." The photograph of the second nest shows this not to be *always* correct, at any rate. In many places where it nests there are so many stones that the nest must be close to one of them. Egg collectors are very attracted by the eggs, which are very handsome, but they certainly can do the bird very little harm. It seems doubtful whether even in the fashionable egging districts they find more than one nest in every five, and like most other birds they always lay again if the first nest is destroyed ; but it is the egg collector who has increased our knowledge of the bird, at any rate. The question is often asked, " What is the best way to find a greenshank's nest ? " and it is a very difficult question to answer. Probably the best answer is, " By a judicious mixture of watching and searching favoured by luck," and luck seems to be the principal ingredient in the mixture.

The dunlin was photographed during our greenshank expedition, as we have already mentioned in

passing. It is a friendly little bird, and probably most people have seen it in numbers on the sea-shore in winter, picking up food on the mud-flats and wheeling and flitting about in flocks low over the water. In the nesting season it is more difficult to find, and its favourite situation is bleak moorland, where it nests in late May or early June. In certain favoured parts of England it nests on the marshes by the sea, but in our own home district—as indeed in most—it haunts the highest ground. There are only three or four pairs there on an enormous extent of ground, and it never seemed worth while hunting for the nest. Many people have tried to find one; but in twenty years we only heard of two nests being found, both of them by pure chance. In the North of Scotland, however, it is much more common, and there it can be found in many places, in fact in every locality where the ground is suitable. The sort of ground it likes most appears to be wet peat bog with little pools here and there all over it. If you go and search a bit of such ground in the nesting season you will probably hear the bird before you see it. It makes a noise which sounds as if it was a madly angry grasshopper, and it is very difficult to see the bird on the ground, although it is quite tame and will allow humans to walk up quite close to it.

Presently your eye will be possibly attracted by a small bird with a black chest about the size of a lark running along the peat ruts in front of you, and probably moving very fast indeed. If you are lucky you will see the bird performing its love flight, when it flits all over the place making its "chirruping" noise. Sometimes it hangs in the air motionless on out-stretched wings. Although it usually runs off the nest when anyone comes near it, it is sometimes possible to flush the bird off the nest, when it puts up quite a good performance of the broken wing trick, but it is in our opinion quite a difficult nest to find.

Now we were staying at this time with the U.B., who was a livery old gentleman, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. The U.B. pooh-poohed the idea that the nest was difficult to find, and announced that he knew where seven or eight pairs of dunlins nested round a lake and that we should find a nest easily. We had a try, and began the search at about eleven o'clock in the morning. We instantly jumped a bird which did the broken wing trick, and began to look for the nest. The U.B. went on by himself and jumped another bird in the same way. We practically walked the moor flat round these two places and found nothing whatever, and at two o'clock we went up to interview the U.B.

and found him cursing all dunlins and those who were idiots enough to inveigle him into looking for dunlins' nests. We therefore presumed he had been no more successful than we had.

Search as we might (and four of us set about the business really hard), we never found a single nest on that bit of ground. Birds we saw in plenty, and found the fresh " scratchings " in many places. The eggs are quite easy to see as a rule, and so we comforted ourselves by saying that it is more than doubtful if such a supposition was correct.

In fairness to the U.B. it must be admitted that there is one locality in which dunlins are *very* abundant and where they are ridiculously easy to find.

However, the difficulty was solved some days later when the keeper showed us a nest. Brook was installed over this nest, as we have already described, and the rest of the party watched the proceedings with glasses from a distance. The little bird returned at once, and it ran most surprisingly quickly. Round and round the hide it went, examining it from every angle. The hide had been there for some hours, and the bird seemed at one time to have got used to it; but something was wrong, and the bird did not like the look of it at all. Every half minute or so the bird dashed up

Dunlin.

She "rushed up to the nest and sat down."

Facing page 40.

to the nest, and as quickly dashed away again. By no means whatever could the photographer get a chance to expose a plate successfully. As a matter of fact, he tried two quick exposures when the bird was near the nest. In each case the little demon had jumped and was a mere blur, until at last, after about twenty minutes, the little bird rushed up to the nest and sat down. Of course, the plate was instantly touched off, and here it is. It was really rather comic to see the way in which the bird rushed on to the eggs. Time was getting on, and so we did not persevere, or doubtless we could have got a good series of photographs of this jolly little bird.

So ended a most enjoyable holiday. At first sight the immense stretches of bare and stony ground over which we went seemed the very abomination of desolation—without a tree or human habitation. The eternal sameness of everything was depressing. However, for a nature lover there were many things to look at. We saw luxuries like the short-eared owl in the heather and the black-throated diver on the lochs. Great towering, snow-covered " Bens " looked down on us, and after a time one grew fond of the country, monotonous in its sameness though it was. The sight of those great hills was alluring, and we registered a vow that one day we would climb

them to the very tops—right up into the homes of the dotterel, snow-bunting and the ptarmigan. My word! what a view there must be from up there on a fine spring day.

CHAPTER II

THE CAPERCAILLIE AND THE CRESTED TIT

THE capercaillie and the crested tit may seem to be a curious mixture, the large and the small of it so to speak, but they live in the same forests and we dealt with them both together. As most people know, the crested tit is found in practically only one area in Great Britain, and that is in a certain Scottish valley in the pine forests which abound in that singularly beautiful district. (We never mention names, even though most people will know exactly where the district is.) It is curious that the crested tit seems never to have existed in the woodlands of any of the neighbouring valleys, which appear very similar in all ways to its chosen home, and no one can explain why it should inhabit one valley and not the other. Of course, the huge mountain ranges in between the valleys seem to be an insuperable bar for most birds—anyhow, for woodland birds—and all migration seems to go round these mountains, up and down the coast. The crested tit will not be found again until the searcher

has crossed the seas and travelled a thousand miles or more.

We arrived in this district in early May whilst a blizzard was raging, and it continued to rage for forty-eight hours. For two whole days we were cooped up indoors, feeling the reverse of cheerful all this time. However when the snow stopped eventually we set out with a local naturalist, and a most excellent one, to a caper's nest which he had found some days before. Our friend is a forester, and hates capers like poison. Apparently now that they have become numerous they do an immense amount of damage to young trees, and are destroyed ruthlessly as vermin in most places where good forestry is practised. Everyone knows, I suppose, that the indigenous capercaillie died out in the eighteenth century, and that Scandinavian birds were re-introduced into Scotland—into Perthshire, I believe, to be exact—some time about 1830. As a matter of fact, they came into the home woods of the crested tit in quite recent times, during the memory of man now living, and we actually stayed with a man who claimed to have brought them into the district. He had got eggs from Perthshire, and had put them into greyhens' nests.

The cock caper is now the largest game bird existing in Great Britain, and I believe that they

have been shot weighing as much as twelve pounds. Certainly when they rise and go crashing through the trees they look magnificent. The hen is much smaller than her lord and master, and only about half his weight. In this case the bird rose off her six eggs whilst we were still thirty yards away, and we found the nest in old overgrown heather. This was fortunate, because it provided plenty of cover. We pulled up a large quantity and embedded Brook and his camera in it, with the lens within eight feet of the nest. It made quite a good hide. The rest of the party went on to find a crested tit's nest, and Brook patiently waited for something to turn up. Nothing whatever happened for an hour and three quarters.

When Brook was half asleep dreaming of the golden eagle we had been hunting for during the previous week he suddenly woke with a start. There was the eagle, or something very much like it, right in front of him. It was, in fact, a large cock caper standing about fifteen yards off beyond the nest, and staring suspiciously straight at the lens. He looked just like an eagle himself, with his great hooked beak, and he was a fine sight with the bronze black plumage shining in the sun. And he remained standing motionless with his beard waggling in the breeze. Brook refrained from saying " Beaver,"

because he guessed the cock was following the hen up to the nest, and in this he was quite correct.

Of course, the cock caper is polygamous, and takes no interest in any nesting arrangements whatever. In this case he had evidently merely followed the hen, thinking probably that she was unattached to a nest. Brook presently saw the hen sneaking up through the heather, and hoped against hope that the cock would follow her into the picture. He looked so large that it really seemed doubtful if the plate would hold him. However, he never came nearer than ten yards, and the hen came on by herself. As she came creeping on to the nest he snapped her, and got a very good picture indeed. She shuffled the eggs just like a barn-door hen. Brook could get no picture of this, because he was so close that he had to change the plate very cautiously. By the time he had done so the bird had settled down and begun to sit in a perfectly natural manner with head erect, a very different picture to the usual "stalked" photograph of a caper crouching on the nest. She remained in this position until we arrived and got Brook out of the hide. We had had quite a successful search for the crested tit, and found a nest building. We had also found several that had been robbed by

Capercaillie sitting.

Hide from which the Capercaillie was photographed.
On the right is H. A. Gilbert.

Facing page 46.

professional egg-sellers. These had every trace of the nest removed and hidden, but we found one nest that had just been robbed, evidently by a squirrel. At any rate, it was not by a collector, for the nest was not pulled out and hidden, and the inside of the nest was full of pieces of egg-shell, richly marked with darker red spots than other tits' eggs.

So we got a chance of seeing what the nest was made of. This nest was quite a bulky mass of material for so small a bird, made of moss with an inner lining of deer's hair. This material is generally used by the bird for lining its nest, and it lays very few eggs for a tit—four or five only. My friend told me that in all the years he had lived in the district he had rarely seen six eggs in a nest, and that he did not believe a clutch of seven had ever existed outside collections of bought eggs.

The crested tit very often, but by no means always, excavates a hole in a dead and rotten pine stump. This hole is usually excavated just behind the bark, the bird cutting out the outer layer of wood against the bark, and the nest illustrated in the photographs is typical of this kind of nesting site. The crested tit also differs from the other kinds of tits in the way it will come out of the hole if the nesting stump is touched. Other tits will

sit as tight as wax, but the crested tit generally comes dashing out at the slightest provocation.

When we found it on the tenth of May the birds were about and the nest was still being excavated. They make a very high, clear note,* quite different to the other tits, and are not difficult to find in the pine-wood by anyone who has good ears. We watched them for some time, feeding on aphis among the pine needles. This was a very good nest for photography, and we were lucky in finding it. Often nests are in the very depths of the pine-wood, and the light is generally not good enough to get good results with such a quick-moving little bird.

This nest was on the extreme edge of the thick forest, and the light was quite good. Two days later we called on the birds again. They were then building and coming to the nest frequently, bringing deer's hair on most occasions. They were astonishingly tame, and no hide was needed. We rigged up the camera about twelve feet off and got to work, and nine exposures were obtained in four hours, and we had plenty of opportunity to watch these birds. One of them, presumably the cock, did nothing at all towards building the nest. He followed the hen and fussed about the nest, but

* One note is very like that of the blue tit, but with a trilled ending.

Crested Tit at nesting-hole.

She has lowered her crest as usual when entering the nest.

Facing page 48.

did nothing to help her at all. The hen worked in short bursts, making several visits at short intervals, and then ceasing altogether for three-quarters of an hour or so, during which she fed. The material she was bringing was evidently obtained quite a long way off, and was almost invariably deer's hair. The movements were so rapid that it was generally impossible to take a photograph, and very often the bird made half a dozen or more visits without giving us a real chance. There was one amusing interlude. The camera was placed close to the bole of a fir-tree, and down this tree ran an unsuspecting squirrel. It came within a couple of feet of us, and then spotted the camera and dashed up the tree grunting and coughing its displeasure. The crested tits came back and flew round the squirrel " cussing " and swearing at it. They knew their enemy well enough. There is no doubt that a squirrel is a merciless ruffian in his behaviour to small birds.

We did not return to the nest until three weeks later, on June 4th. The area was right in the path of the collector, and we approached in fear and trembling lest we should find the nest pulled out and destroyed. To our joy it was intact, and the bird flew out of the hole when we tapped the stump. She was brooding four or five callow young, which we could just see in the nest, and she flew all round

us within a few feet, protesting and voluble. We both exclaimed simultaneously, "Oh! you little beauty!" They are lovely little birds.

The cock turned up instantly and lifted up his voice also, and this was about as much work as he did the whole time we were there. The young were quite small, and did not require much food. What they were given was supplied by the hen alone, and consisted of minute insects. No doubt when the young get larger they want more food, and the cock then assists the hen and actually feeds the young himself.

This is the case with many other birds as far as we have seen. Whilst we were watching the cock very often fed the hen, even if he did not go near the nest. She would go up to him, fluttering her wings, and he would instantly give her anything he found handy.* The hen did not feed the young continuously through the day. She would make about a dozen visits to the young, and then pop into the hole and brood them for forty minutes or so. On one occasion when she was brooding it was rather amusing to watch the cock. He had obviously mislaid his wife, and fussed about calling and trying to find her. At last he flew to the mouth

* I think you will find that the cock *first* catches the food *then* calls the hen to take it or goes with it to her. Note by U.B.

Crested Tit with food.

Facing page 50.

of the nesting-hole and peered in. He could make nothing of it, and flew off again to look for his partner. At last he flew down to the stump and went down the hole. He stayed inside quite half a minute to satisfy himself that all was well, and then came out quite contented. This was the only occasion on which he went near the nest. It was curious to see that the crested tit always lowers its crest as soon as it arrives at or very near the entrance hole. The crest is then lowered and pulled tight down, and the bird looks an ordinary round-headed tit with no sign of a crest.

All good things come to an end, and we had to pack up at last. That night we made our way south carrying many memories with us. The country of the crested tit in June is beautiful beyond description. Actually where the bird lives—in the depths of the forest—is rather dull. The everlasting sameness of the woods is monotonous and the view is very limited. Apart from the crested tit there is little bird life to interest a naturalist. Besides the game birds, chaffinches, tree-creepers, cole tits, and a greater spotted woodpecker or two provide nearly the whole bird population in the thick forest.

The country is too well "keepered" to allow the presence of many raptorial birds, and the

ubiquitous hooded crow is the only bird of this nature that is in evidence at all. Outside the forest it is quite a different matter. Birds are much more numerous. The bubbling note of the curlew, the cheerful call of the redshank and more rarely of the greenshank, the chuckle of the cock grouse, the plaintive whistle of the golden plover, and down by the waterside the gentle piping of the sandpiper and the oyster-catcher follow you wherever you go.

Great mountains stand up above you all the time, and when the setting sun tinges the snow drifts on the tops with pink the sight is one which can never be forgotten. The dark mass of the pine-trees, edged with the gentle green of the birch-woods provide a magnificent setting for the gleam of loch and stream. The huge scale on which the landscape is built impresses an Englishman.

It must be difficult to be an atheist if you live in such country in springtime, and withal it is inhabited by a kindly people. The general idea that Highlanders are a red-haired, gaunt, bony, whiskered, kilted race, who spend their time lying dead drunk in the snow saying witty things about bawbees to a top-hatted elder appears to be slightly overdrawn. We received so much kindness from absolute strangers that it is impossible for us

not to be enthusiastic and grateful. We have many friends among another hill people, the Welsh, but the Welshman is different. He expands slowly, and is difficult to get to know until you have known a couple of generations of his family. After this space of time you have no more loyal friend. The cheerfulness and willingness of the Highlander cannot fail to impress the stranger. If you ask a man to go with you one mile he will cheerfully guide you for twain, and for no mercenary motive either. Anyhow, we did not look opulent, and reward for kindness received certainly did not seem to affect the matter. The Highlander seems to make a better job of life than most.

The snow always visible above you is a reminder of that grim northern climate. The struggle for existence in the woods must be intense. At the end of the long winter season the survival of the resident insectivorous birds must be a question of touch and go. Perhaps this is the reason why the crested tit rears so few young. The country will not support large numbers in winter, and Nature sees to it that the rate of increase is low. A few hours later, when we were spinning over the border in very different country, at Gretna we lifted our hats and said "Au revoir," but quite certainly not "Good-bye." That dreadful day when there

remain no more new Scotch birds for us to photograph is still far distant, thank Heaven! and return we mean to if we can, again and again, until we have got every single species on the plate.

CHAPTER III

THE RAVEN AND THE PEREGRINE FALCON

THE raven, we think, is the finest bird that flies, and he is our favourite over all others. Most bird books seem to begin with him, I presume because he is the highest in the scale of intellectual development. The bird certainly makes a very good beginning, because it is not only clever and most interesting in its habits, but because it is very well known to most people and generally distributed over our islands. From the far north to the extreme south it can be seen on nearly all our sea cliffs and in most hilly districts also. There is no doubt that it nested everywhere a hundred years ago, and that it would still be doing so if game preservers had not "improved" it out of existence in many counties. It is remarkable and encouraging to have watched the great increase among our raven population during the last ten years, and it is to be hoped that this will continue. To give an instance of this. Only last spring we got word from a keeper that a raven had nested in a tree and was sitting close to his cottage. This was very nearly in the centre of England. Probably there had not been a

raven anywhere in the neighbourhood for sixty years. It was certainly many miles from any other raven's nest that we had ever heard of or seen. It seemed impossible, and we went to the place expecting to find at the most an early crow's nest. To our surprise we found that the information was correct, and we were overjoyed to put the hen off an undoubted raven's nest in the largest tree for miles around. It was just such a tree as Gilbert White describes in his *History of Selborne*, and unclimbable by any village boy.*

* The description is so fine that I quote it in full: "In the centre of this grove there stood an oak, which, though shapely and tall on the whole, bulged out into a large excrescence about the middle of the stem. On this a pair of ravens had fixed their residence for such a series of years, that the oak was distinguished by the title of the Raven-tree. Many were the attempts of the neighbouring youths to get at this eyry: the difficulty whetted their inclinations, and each was ambitious of surmounting the arduous task. But when they arrived at the swelling, it jutted out so in their way, and was so far beyond their grasp, that the most daring lads were awed and acknowledged the undertaking to be too hazardous. So the ravens built on, nest upon nest, in perfect security, till the fatal day arrived in which the wood was to be levelled. It was in the month of February, when those birds usually sit. The saw was applied to the butt, the wedges were inserted into the opening, the woods echoed to the heavy blows of the beetle or mallet, the tree nodded to its fall; but still the dam sat on. At last, when it gave way, the bird was flung from her nest; and, though her parental affection deserved a better fate, was whipped down by the twigs, which brought her dead to the ground."—Letter II. to Thomas Pennant, Esq.

A raven would not sit so tight as this nowadays. They have good reason not to trust mankind and his shot-gun.

On another occasion we were amazed to see a raven's nest with four eggs within a mile and a half of a real city, complete with mayor, alderman, and all. This was in a ridiculous situation, on a small crag about twenty feet high, and a small boy could have walked into the nest. Although before game preserving became general the raven nested habitually in trees in England, it is now uncommon to find a nest in such a situation. Here and there a few birds still do so, but as a rule they nest on cliffs if they possibly can, and the tree-nesters are those who cannot find a suitable cliff to dwell on. With the late increase of the raven more and more are driven to use trees as a nesting site, and one hopes that very soon they will return to their old haunts, and that the " raven tree " will again be well known in rural England.

When viewed at close quarters, as can be seen in the photographs, the raven is a large and powerful bird, and his great pickaxe of a bill is a very prominent feature. It is this huge bill, as well as the difference in size, which distinguishes the bird from the crow when it is seen flying at a distance. The raven has more pointed wings and a longer tail in proportion than the crow, and the beak sticks out far in front of the bird from a short, thick neck. Moreover, the raven is extremely talkative, and his gruff " hock

hock" will attract attention at once. They pair for life, and are exemplary spouses and very good parents indeed. If one of the old birds is shot or dies there is no nonsense about going into mourning. The survivor gets a mate, and it is remarkable how soon a new lover is found; but once found they seem to be good lovers, constant and faithful unto death.

The family remain together from the moment the young leave the nest in April or early May until about September, when the old birds drive their offspring away to begin the battle of life for themselves. For the rest of the year the two old birds are never apart, and can always be seen together. As they play about in the breeze above a sea cliff they can readily be identified even at a great distance because of the habit of closing their wings and diving for many feet. They also have another curious trick when annoyed or excited of closing their wings and turning clean over on their backs in the air. They are the earliest birds to begin nesting in this country, with the sole exception, perhaps, of the crossbill. We have seen a raven sitting on seven eggs on the 22nd of February, and most self-respecting ravens have nests and eggs by the first week in March. Hard weather seems to make no difference to their arrangements, and often

Raven feeding six young ones.

Facing page 58.

nests on the high ground are surrounded by snow and ice even when the young have hatched.

From the moment the first egg is laid until the young are a week old the hen is always at the nest. She never hands on her duties to the cock, and the latter feeds her at or near the nest. So true is this that if both old birds are seen away from the nest in March it can be taken for granted that the eggs have been taken by a collector. Not that this disturbs the raven; a more determined bird never existed, and eggs will certainly be laid a second time, and often even a third if anyone is so cruel as to take a second clutch. Very often the bird lays all three clutches in the same nest. All food is carried in a pouch in the throat under the chin by both birds to the young, and by the cock to the hen when she is incubating. The amount of food they carry is surprising. A full load of carrion must weigh certainly a pound or more. What the food is will be described later, but before we leave the subject it would be well to describe what happens when a nest is visited whilst the cock is away getting food for his mate. When he comes back his throat is distended and quite full. He opens his mouth to swear at the trespasser, and an angry raven can swear as well as any bargee, and no sound issues forth. He flies past with his beak open doing his best, but

until he has delivered his load to the hen he has no relief for his lacerated feelings.

Although the plumage of both sexes is alike, black with a splendid purple and greenish sheen, there is no doubt that the cock is the brighter looking bird. The difference is not very marked, but when viewed at close quarters from a photographer's hide the sexes can be quite easily distinguished. While the hen is at the nest the cock is most attentive, and is generally perched on guard close at hand except when he is away foraging. He not only has a favourite perching-place close to the nest, but he also roosts in some position as near the nest as possible, often within a few feet, where shelter can be obtained under an overhanging rock. This roosting-place of the cock can always be found close to the nest, and is conspicuous because of the amount of whitewash on it.

Those birds who nest high up in the hills are very jealous of any intrusion by other birds, and drive them away. Buzzards and other large birds are attacked at once. When human beings are at or near the nest the old birds often get beside themselves with rage and anxiety, and give vent to their feelings by chasing any and every bird they can see—jackdaws and kestrels mostly. In this habit they differ from the sea-coast ravens, who do not

Raven about to feed callow young.

Facing page 60.

appear to demonstrate in this way at all, presumably because they see so many more birds than those which nest far away in the hills. At any rate, we have seldom seen a raven on the sea-coast resent the presence of other birds, and they generally allow gulls, etc., to fly all round them and even close past the nest.

When the young are in danger you often see the old birds work themselves into such a temper, that they pitch down and tear grass up by the roots, looking a very picture of impotent rage. On one occasion under such conditions we saw a bird settle on a sheep's back and tear the wool off it, to everyone's great amusement except the sheep's.

If a raven's nest is visited in March the cock generally flaps off the cliff at the first sight of an intruder, barking and tumbling, and the hen will leave the eggs very shortly afterwards. Very often she will try and slip silently away out of sight. If there are young in the nest the old birds are very demonstrative, that is if they have not been persecuted by keepers and shepherds. If the cock is away the hen will often fly round calling within easy gunshot, and it is comic to see the change in her behaviour when the cock arrives on the scene. After he has given his warning bark she will come near you no more, but maintains a respectful distance.

The cock is certainly wiser in his generation than the hen. It is pitiable to see the difference in behaviour in places where keepers have tried to destroy the old birds. They will no longer come near you, and keep away almost out of sight.

The raven is always a difficult bird to photograph, but it is impossible to do anything with a pair that has been shot at near the nest. We have never tried to get a picture of such birds. It would be impossible to do so. There is no doubt that, fond and loving parents as they are, they would desert the young as soon as a hide was put up anywhere near the nest. It is easy, however, to tell an unmolested pair, and we know of two pairs in Wales which are undisturbed and bold. Their sole human neighbours, a shepherd or two, are fond of the birds, and would resent any attempt to harm them. Yearly we get letters from them telling us how the " crows " are getting on. To get to these nests with gear and all our necessary baggage is an arduous undertaking. They lie far away in the solitude of mountains, and the only shelter is a shepherd's cottage. Old " Billy Boy," our host and helper on most of our raven expeditions, is a great character. He lives alone on a hill-top miles from any neighbour, and from his house can be seen a large part of the principality of Wales spread as a map below. A

hardier old fellow never lived. We always think that tobacco is his chief sustenance. He chews all day, and seems to eat little else. Black stewed tea without milk and dry bread appear to be his sole food. He is a stocky, sturdily built old man, generally topped by an ancient bowler hat with his long hair straggling through the cracks, and a real Welshman strongly endowed with the usual pugnacity of his countrymen. In all the sixty years he has lived on the hill I do not suppose he has ever felt lonely; his dogs and the ravens nesting just below his house provide all the companionship he wants.

It is interesting to note the difference between the Scotch and the Welsh shepherd. A Scotchman in old Billy's position would never rest until he had destroyed the ravens or driven them away, whereas the Welshman rather likes seeing them, and would fight anybody who came to molest them. In fact, the birds know the old gentleman well, and the hen will hardly leave the nest if old Billy goes near it alone. Unlike the Scotchman, who uses a spy-glass all day for shepherding and need do little walking, old Billy trudges the hill and looks over all his sheep in turn. We often wonder why the Welsh shepherds do not take to the use of the telescope and halve their labour thereby.

We have also photographed another nest, and

to do this we actually got to the house in a motor-car. We noticed everyone in the valley struck work as we advanced up the river-bed which was our road and watched us open-mouthed. On arrival we were told that this was the first car which had ever braved the ascent. It was easy to believe. Only a very natural disinclination to carry heavy weights up a hill kept us going in many places.

We have never tried to photograph a raven in a tree, because many of the inland cliffs are more or less easy and have good ledges and crannies in which to build a hide. The hide is put up after the young have hatched, usually in the last days of March, and the attempt is made a few days afterwards when the old birds have got accustomed to it. It is never easy to get a good raven photograph, in fact it has seldom been done. Most of the nests are in impossible situations for photography, on great beetling crags, and many of the easy ones are the occupation of shy and persecuted birds. The worst difficulty of all is the plumage of the bird, which makes it very difficult to get a real good picture.

It is, of course, not easy to make a hide overlooking the nest, and neither of us feel very happy on a cliff. One admits himself to be a real cliff funk, and the other feels like a whole herd of Gadarene

swine every time he feels his weight go on the rope, but we are both prepared to go anywhere for a good photograph. Old Billy is even worse than either of us, and when a hide has to be put up his " nevvy Jawn " is summoned, and has to toil up from the valley below to do the job.

The nest is always placed under an overhang to protect it from falling stones. Ravens know just as well as any climber or egg collector that the greatest danger on a cliff is the risk of rocks falling from above, and they are clever enough to take measures to protect themselves accordingly. We have only seen one nest that was not safely tucked in under a projecting rock, and that contained one young one instead of the usual four or five, together with a large stone. It is to be presumed that this stone had fallen into the nest and destroyed some of the eggs. The nest itself is quite a large structure, consisting of large sticks outside, with a lining of wool and other soft material. Against the sticks are grass roots, etc., and there seems to be a certain amount of mud and earth among the sticks, presumably to hold them together. At first sight it appears to be very roughly put together, but in reality, as can be easily seen on a closer examination, it is most beautifully built. The sticks are most carefully put together, and the nest is so strongly

made that it will endure for years in the most exposed situation, provided the young do not hatch and fly from it. If they do everything gets trodden flat, and the whole nest gradually falls to pieces. The nest is a very deep cup, and its inner lining is wonderfully felted together. It takes nearly three weeks to build, and most of the time seems to be spent on the lining, of which the hen takes the greatest care whilst the young are blind and helpless. No human mother makes the baby's bed more carefully than does the raven for her young. She tugs and pulls until she is quite sure everything is soft and warm for them to lie on. When they are just hatched she will spend quite a lot of time in doing this.

As has been already stated, ravens are very good parents and very fond of their young ones. When the young are small and do not want a great deal of food the hen very often sits somewhere above them where they can be seen and croons to them gently. It is a peculiar noise and inaudible at any distance. As the young get larger she is too busy getting food to waste any time in sentiment. It is rather ridiculous to see her obvious love and admiration for such abominable-looking objects. At this stage in its career a young raven is most unsightly, it consists chiefly of an enormous stomach and a

huge maw, which it feebly lifts and opens at the slightest sound or when a shadow falls on the nest. When the young do this they present a remarkable sight. It looks as if a large bunch of violets had suddenly come into bloom in the nest. The inside of their mouths and throats are bright mauve in colour, and when the young gape and squeak for food this colour shows up very distinctly.

In the nest are laid generally five eggs; six are frequently to be seen, and three times we have found as many as seven. The eggs are like large rooks' eggs, greenish-blue with dark spots and markings and are surprisingly small for so large a bird. Provided a good hide can be put over a nest belonging to a pair of ravens whose nerves have not been upset by persecution, there ought to be no difficulty in getting photographs. The old birds feed at frequent intervals from dawn till about 11 a.m. They then come at longer intervals until about 3 p.m., when they begin to work hard again. These times are by the sun, of course; you cannot expect a bird even as knowing as a raven to observe Acts of Parliament and keep Summer Time. Towards dark they are coming in every few minutes, and they work very late. The slackest time is the middle of the day, say from about twelve to two. As far as we have seen the food is nearly all flesh, and carrion

at that. A raven's taste is not nice and his meals are disgusting—liable to upset the strongest stomach. To see the old bird arrive with his pouch crammed, and to see him put a mass of steaming putrid mutton on the edge of the nest is horrid, and that is what he often does. It is this taste for carrion that is the raven's undoing. A farmer or shepherd sees the ravens feeding on a dead sheep or a lamb, and instantly accuses them of sheep murder. Poison and the trap are the next step in the tragedy. Personally we do not believe the raven does any harm. He merely acts as a scavenger, and we believe that he does not murder even weakly or dying animals himself. We have pointed out over and over again to shepherds that a raven can always be seen on a dead pony or bullock whenever there is one about, and no one accuses him of destroying the larger animals.

We heard a remarkable statement from a rabbit trapper in the West not long ago. He stated he hated ravens and shot them when he could, because of the manner in which they pulled his trapped rabbits to pieces. "But," he said, "they never touch a rabbit while life is in him, and if I go round the traps frequently no damage is done. I have seen the ravens sitting by a rabbit in a trap waiting for it to die."

If you watch the ravens feeding young you will see that they move backwards and forwards along one or two lines, and if you follow these up you will find the carrion they are feeding on. They may possibly have to go as far as three or four miles or even more, but to carrion they will go if they can possibly find it. In Wales, at any rate, they can find plenty. In the hill country the County Council orders about the burial of dead animals is more honoured in the breach than in the observance. I trust for the raven's sake this will long continue. Ravens never seem to hunt the moor for eggs and young birds in the manner which that scoundrel the carrion crow does, for whose many misdemeanours the raven is blamed and suffers accordingly. The keeper—sometimes, I fear, a bad observer—shoots the poor raven because of his likeness to the crow in appearance, although no two birds differ more in habits, and the shepherd suspects him because he feeds on the dead sheep and lambs. It is a pity.

There is nothing which makes us more infuriated than to visit a nest and find the old birds shot and the young lying dead and cold in the nest. This we have seen. It makes one nearly turn Berserker, take an axe and slay those responsible for such a vile deed.

We believe the raven harms neither the game preserver nor the farmer and cottager, and we make this considered statement in all seriousness. It is not that the raven cannot kill other animals. It is obvious that with his strong neck muscles and that appalling weapon of a beak he could kill most animals if he wanted to. It is simply that he does not have to do so, because there is always sufficient carrion to supply his requirements, and it will be many a day before ravens become so numerous that they outgrow their food supply. Carrion they prefer before all else, and this is the staple food of the young even when they are newly hatched. On two occasions only have we watched the old birds bringing any other food. They were then hunting the grass above the cliff top for some form of insect life, waddling and searching just like huge rooks.

The raven is no songster. We have described two of its notes, the warning bark of the cock and the gentle crooning of the hen to her callow young. A slight difference can be detected between the note of the cock and the hen. The former has a gruffer, deeper note than the latter. In addition, the hen when in distress, as for instance when she has been made to leave the nest whilst she has been brooding the young, flies round making a quick high note. The cock is the more vigilant bird of the two, and

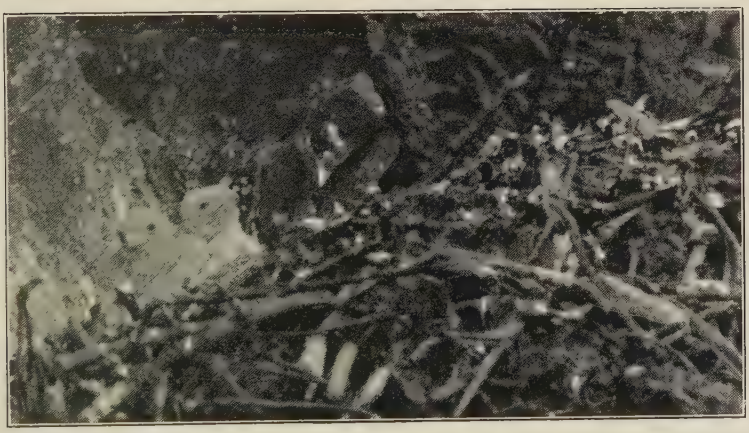
little escapes him. We can always tell when we are going to have a successful session over a nest. When the photographer has been hidden, and his helpers have left in a body, the cock flies round making careful inspection, and if he is satisfied he gives the " all clear " signal, quite a different note to the others, " torrook, torrook." When he has once done this the old birds carry on their duties immediately. On one occasion when we were working a cinematograph the cock gave the " all clear " signal and perched close by the hide within a yard of the camera. The hen went on the nest, and of course the photographer began to turn the handle. The cock was thoroughly startled by the " sewing machine " noise, although he could see nothing, and called to the hen to come off. For once in a way she took no notice of his warning whatever, and continued to feed the young and clean the nest. We presume that once the " all clear " signal is given maternal love triumphs over all alarms about invisible things.

After a time the cock got accustomed to the noise and began feeding the young himself, and his favourite perch was closer to the hide than we have ever seen it. In fact, on several occasions his wings scraped the hide as he alighted.

The raven, as we have already said, is the master

of all the birds on the hillside and moorland. We have several times seen a raven feeding on a dead lamb, and around him, waiting at a respectful distance for his lordship to finish, were buzzards and black-backed gulls. One bird and one bird only can compete with him, and even at times master him, and that bird is often his nearest neighbour, the gentleman round the corner of the cliff, the peregrine falcon. There is no finer bird, and no bird receives worse treatment at the hand of man. It is far rarer than the raven owing to the merciless persecution meted out to it by keepers and others, and the number of nesting sites is very limited. It invariably breeds on crags, and is now practically confined in the breeding season to the big cliffs on the sea-coast, but here and there it still nests inland. In the latter situation the space available is small, and the raven and the peregrine are often compelled to have their homes in close proximity. Neighbours they must be, but friends they never are. In March, when the raven is already nesting and the peregrine has taken up its quarters for the spring, the latter is intensely jealous of intrusion, and fighting is continuous. As soon as a raven takes the air so does the peregrine, and makes stoop after stoop in rapid succession on its enemy. If the stoop of the peregrine is directed on an object close to

Young Ravens.



Young Peregrine Falcons.

In an old raven's nest, which is covered with pigeon's feathers.

Facing page 72.

anyone, they will hear a most terrifying noise. The bird hurtling through the air at such a tremendous speed makes a noise exactly like the hiss of a howitzer shell arriving.

The powers of flight of the peregrine are remarkable, and it can make rings round the raven. The latter, even if it has no means of offence against such a speedy opponent, has in return a sure and certain method of defence. As the falcon stoops, just at the right fraction of a second the raven turns on his back and presents his great beak upwards for the other to impale itself on if it will. This never takes place. The falcon sheers off up into the air again, to make another stoop instantly, and so the performance is repeated again and again. If the ravens are building, they work under conditions of great difficulty and are pestered continually. They generally, if they can, work from the side of the cliff farthest from the peregrine's chosen eyrie, and try to sneak up to the nest along the cliff.

Later in the season, when the peregrine is sitting and the raven is feeding young, the war dies down and comparative peace reigns. The ravens, however, are allowed only one way to approach their nest, and if they dare to pass the peregrine eyrie the cock dives out at them instantly and drives them off in the same determined fashion as he did a month

before. Although the raven can more or less protect himself other birds are helpless. Not long ago we saw a crow go too near an eyrie. Down the cock peregrine dashed at him, and we could hear him strike the crow a full hundred yards away. The crow shrieked in terror and fled for its life, with the cock peregrine in pursuit until the crow escaped into cover. A friend of ours has described to us how he saw one day this year a poor innocent old buzzard go sailing into danger. In a very few seconds he left the scene very much the worse for wear, much more hurriedly than he arrived, leaving clouds of feathers floating in his wake.

Sometimes both hawks attack the raven together, then stoop follows stoop in such rapid succession that the poor raven, unable to fly on its back, is forced down to the ground and has to take cover under a bush, where it sits waiting sulkily until the coast is clear again. When the peregrine is attacking in this way one can see what a magnificent bird it is. A great blue hawk with beautiful plumage, two and a half pounds of muscle and pluck, shooting and diving through the air, it excites everybody's admiration. The long, narrow, pointed wings are bent back in sickle shape, and it is built on stream line principles with the weight in front. As is the case with most hawks, the hen is much larger than the cock. It is

sad to think of the numbers of these splendid birds which are unnecessarily destroyed every year. And by unnecessarily we mean those who do no harm to anyone. A pair of peregrines on a grouse moor may be, and probably are, a pest and a nuisance which it is necessary to remove. We have never studied them in a game country, and know nothing of their habits under such situations. At any rate, speaking personally, I would sooner shoot a fox in Leicestershire than shoot a peregrine under any conditions whatever. We have only watched a few pairs inland in Wales, and there they do no damage whatever. Few partridges and even fewer grouse exist in their neighbourhood, and their food consists entirely of pigeons, which can readily be spared. A peregrine ledge by the time the young are ready to fly is a perfect shambles, bones and feathers are strewn everywhere. In the few eyries we know of inland we have never seen any prey except pigeons, and from the little we have seen of the eyries on the sea-coast little harm seems to be done there also. And yet we find that ignorant busy-bodies will borrow an ancient fowling-piece every year, and try and destroy the falcons if they can. Very often they undoubtedly succeed, and the reason given for this senseless destruction is generally that "the blue hawks have been taking Mrs. Jones's chickens."

That a peregrine should do any such thing we very much doubt. It always seems to us that the falcon will only kill in the air, and that any prey on the ground is beneath his notice. He gets his food easily, and can afford to pick and choose. If Mrs. Jones's chickens disappear we suspect a sparrow hawk or a crow is the malefactor, and that the peregrine, who lives in the open and is obvious to all, gets the blame unfairly.

The peregrine builds no nest of any kind. It merely digs out a shallow scratching on a cliff ledge or occupies an old raven's nest. Sometimes it will even take an unoccupied raven's nest of the year which has been abandoned for some reason or other. In this case the peregrine pulls out all the felted inner lining of the nest and lays its eggs against the bare mud and sticks. The eggs, generally three in number, are very fine, deep red in colour. The hen does all the sitting, and the cock forages and feeds her at the nest. When the cock arrives with food, nearly always plucked and ready for immediate consumption, he gives a peculiar call, a sort of clicking noise, which is answered by his mate. It is the only noise we have heard the birds make, except when the young have hatched or the hen is put off the eggs. In the latter case the hen always circles round screaming "kee, kee, kee, kee," and

when there are young in the eyrie both birds will scream in rage and fury. The hen very often leaves the nest if the cock arrives with food, and catches in the air whatever he drops. We have once seen a cock deliver the official breakfast in a most sensational fashion. He dashed at the ledge full pelt as hard as he could fly, and turned off at right angles when only a few feet away. As he turned he let go the food he was carrying, and dropped it deftly on the ledge at the very feet of his mate. She stood there before us, looking bow-legged on the ledge as she bent and ate her meal.

No bird excites us more, and we have tried to get a photograph of it for a long time. We have never succeeded, and have, in fact, only been able to make one attempt. This was an absolute failure for two reasons, our time was limited to one day and a neighbouring farmer had peppered the hen and upset her. We found the three young in an old raven's nest one evening in June, too late in the day to do anything. It was the only peregrine's nest we have ever found which was in a practicable situation, and unluckily we only had the next day available to finish the job. We slept on the hill and Brook was in the hide at the first peep of the day, about 3.30 Summer Time. The nest was in quite a nasty situation. 150 feet of emptiness yawned below us, but there

was one ledge with some cover on it in a good position. Brook was roped in and the rope was fastened to a crowbar. We found that, early as it was, the hen had already fed the young full on a pigeon. When I had climbed to the nest and ascertained this fact the young screamed and prepared themselves to sell their lives dearly. They turned on their backs and threatened me with beak and claw. They were so full of food that we knew we were in for a long wait. The young would not want another meal for many hours.

To cut a long story short, Brook remained on the ledge until five in the afternoon, and during all those hours the old bird never came to the nest at all. He was in a terribly uncomfortable position. We had made a really good hide of bilberries, heather, and mountain ash boughs. It looked perfectly natural, so much so that later in the day when we went to get Brook out of the hide the keeper could hardly believe a man was hidden near the nest at all, but it was the reverse of comfortable for Brook. There was only a narrow ledge to stand on, and Brook stood on it roped in and tied to a crowbar with that fall of a hundred and fifty feet yawning beneath him. He could not stand upright because that position made the hide too large, and he could not sit down because there was not room to do so

on the ledge. He was in just such an uncomfortable position as that poor old cardinal who was shut up in a cage and hung on a wall by one of the French kings in the Middle Ages. He could get no ease and rest for his tortured limbs. Yet he stuck it manfully and with determination, even though no exciting incident happened to relieve the tedium of his long wait.

The young slept in a gorged condition until about four, but it was not until five that they got hungry and began to call out. It would have been cruel to continue and dare the bird to come back, so we abandoned the attempt.

All day long the old bird screamed. We can hear her angry shrieks even now in our dreams. She swished past the hide within a few feet, so close that Brook often heard the whistle of her wings, but never once did she go to the nest. Brook had lost all feeling from the waist down, and it was a difficult business to get down from the ledge. We got on the ledge ourselves and lowered Brook down. We could not get him up. He scraped and bumped down the face of the cliff, leaving a lot of skin on the projections. When he finally came to rest he was absolutely done and could barely hobble. It was an absolute failure, but a glorious one. I take my hat off to Brook. It was not his fault, and he had

done everything he could to make the performance a success.

It was tantalising to realise that could we have spent a week at the nest we should have got as fine a series of photographs as had ever been taken. If the hide had been put up gradually there is no doubt but that the birds would come freely to the nest. We have never been more disappointed. However, we will get even with the old bird yet, but that will be another story.

CHAPTER IV

THE BUZZARD, THE KITE AND THE CARRION CROW

THE buzzard is a sheep in wolf's clothing. He apes the eagle in appearance, and is, in fact, a clumsy coward. A mere carrion crow can drive him away and make him scream for mercy. Like all those who try to make an appearance above their station, he suffers for his foolishness. Foolish though they may be, a pair of buzzards wheeling against the sky on a bright April day is a very fine sight. They work the wide open spaces for their living, the open hill above the woods is their hunting ground inland. Round and round they circle on motionless, outstretched wings with an occasional slow flap. The wings are rounded at the end, and the bird in flight looks almost exactly like a golden eagle on a much smaller scale. The only practical difference between the two in shape is that the golden eagle's wing span is greater in proportion to its body. I have many times heard the buzzard described as an eagle by those to whom the bird was unfamiliar. Although only a little more than half the size of the

eagle, it looks an impressively large bird when seen for the first time. It is still quite common. Its strongholds lie in the West, and from these places the young wander into England every year, to meet death at the hands of gamekeepers and others. On every keeper's gibbet near the border of their country a wretched buzzard or two hang rotting. No bird is easier to trap or destroy, more is the pity, for it seems to be very nearly harmless. Its powers of flight are too poor to enable it to catch birds and most animals. If it can get it, it prefers carrion in any form to living prey, and a dead rabbit is certain to attract it to a trap and its destruction. Judging by what we have seen at the nest, moles are a very favourite prey. They, with mice and shrews, and also in particular frogs, seem to provide the buzzard with nearly all his sustenance in summer. He is not above catching young birds if he can, we admit. Once a buzzard brought three young wild duck to the nest in a short space of time, but he does not seem able to manage it very often. Otherwise the numerous young peewits and curlews round the nests we have photographed would have figured in the bill of fare. Rabbits he does manage to catch, but only occasionally, and even then of the smallest and most innocent size.

In summer we have often seen the buzzard come

sailing round the corner of a wood in approved sparrow hawk fashion and make a clumsy stoop at the rabbits feeding outside on the grass. He dives into the general scurry for home; the large ones have gone long before he gets near them, and all he gets a chance at are the smallest, scuttling in level time for safety. As far as we have seen it, the buzzard seldom scores a hit. The end of the attempt is the sight of the buzzard sitting empty-handed on the ground looking a perfect ass, and then he flies sulkily away.

A buzzard has to work hard for his living, and does not get it easily like the peregrine. We do not advance the argument that the buzzard will not kill young game if he gets a chance; but we say, what we believe observation will bear out, that he is not possessed of the means of doing much mischief. He is built for soaring and gliding in the breeze, but not for speed. He has the desire to capture most birds and animals doubtless, but with the best will in the world the achievement seems to be beyond his powers.

So he feeds on carrion, frogs and such things as even he can manage to pounce on. At any rate, we have never seen game in any of the many nests we have examined. Even if game should be found in the bird's possession, more than probably it has

been found dead, and is therefore carrion. A jackdaw which we saw in the nest was almost certainly found dead and not captured. The readiness with which a buzzard comes to any dead bait confirms our view.

One can understand a keeper shooting a buzzard at sight, even if one hates the deed. A buzzard looks dangerous to game, at any rate; but when we go into areas where no game is, where a man can acquire the shooting rights, or rather the right of walking with a gun over huge areas and shooting nothing), for a few shillings a year, we frequently meet people out to shoot the poor buzzard. The reason they give is that it kills their sheep and lambs. It is this abysmal ignorance about such a bird which is so sickening. A buzzard may not be a very inspiring bird in its habits, but it is a grand sight in a hill country, and to find it being destroyed for no possible reason whatever is maddening to any nature lover.

At the beginning of the present century the buzzard was quite a rare bird even in Wales. Thanks to the efforts of certain landowners, and also the War, it has increased enormously. We can remember our excitement as small boys when we came across our first buzzard's nest in the days when they were uncommon. Buzzards nest in crags

and in trees impartially, generally in quite easy situations except on the sea-coast. This nest was in the only difficult tree I have seen the bird choose. It was in a magnificent oak, straight and tall, without a bough for many feet. It had been occupied for years, and had grown to be an enormous mass of sticks. We clapped our hands, and the bird, huge in our eyes, sailed off the nest from straight overhead. Then began the sound we have heard so often since, the squealing cat call of the buzzard. Round and round the pair wheeled overhead uttering their long-drawn mournful cry, "pee—yah." In a very short time we had the irons on and practically ran up the tree. Peeping over the edges of the nest, we could see the two large eggs. It was a thrilling moment for boys. I fear we do not get such thrills and excitement in after-life.

There is nothing of much interest about either nest or eggs. I have described the usual situation of the former, but we have actually seen a nest on the ground, and others in such easy places that the underfed Welsh sheep-dogs often walk to the nest and eat the eggs. It is a mass of large sticks loosely put together, and lined with bits of grass, green leaves chiefly ivy and other material of that sort. It is curious that fresh green leaves are often brought to the nest after the eggs are laid, and even after the

young have hatched. We have a photograph of the hen bringing in a sprig of mountain ash to the young ones.

The two or three eggs (four rarely) are whitish sparingly marked by a few red blotches, and generally one or two of them are practically unmarked at all. If the buzzard is robbed of its eggs I believe for my part that it will make a second attempt very seldom indeed. This is the one point on which I and Brook agree to differ. Brook thinks that the buzzard often makes a second attempt, particularly if the first nest is taken when the eggs are quite fresh. We are both agreed, however, that the kite never lays again that year if her eggs are once taken.

The photography of the buzzard is a different proposition and any picture is a prize. The bird is shy and wary, and intolerant of any sign of man's presence near the site of the nest. To give an instance of this. The first photograph Brook ever got was taken from a hide which had been put up long before the nesting season, complete in every detail, even with a dummy lens projecting. It was a massive construction and concealed everything within.

On the appointed day, while the buzzard was still sitting on eggs, a regular party, consisting of several shepherds, their children and their dogs,

proceeded to the nest, which was on a crag, and put Brook in position. Very soon after they had left the hen bird returned, and began to sit without showing any signs of suspicion whatever. A photograph was obtained, and we believe this is the only photograph of a buzzard incubating that has ever been taken. Very soon the bird became restless and uneasy, and at the end of a quarter of an hour it left the eggs and flew away, and the sitting was abandoned. The cause could not have been noise. A waterfall was drumming loudly just behind the hide, drowning all other sound. Conversation had to be carried on by shouting. It could not have been the sight of anything. The hide was exactly as it had been for months, and nothing inside it could be seen. And it could not have been smell, because the hide had been drenched in oil of aniseed for some time before, effectively masking any human scent. The bird must have had some sense with which we are unacquainted. We have photographed several nests. Brook has already described one of his experiences.* In this case the birds were bold to an astonishing degree. The cock would always strike at the photographer. Doubtless the reason was that it was a patriotic bird and knew Brook had a German lens.

* "The Buzzard at Home."

On one other occasion, although the old birds often brought food to the nest, they would never come near it. All that happened was that a mouse or a frog would be dropped with a flop into the nest, and the young would break it up and eat it by themselves.

The first occasion on which a successful photograph was taken the attempt was actually nearly abandoned as useless. The hide had been occupied for six hours. Nothing had happened, and Brook's hand was actually on the dark slide to shut it and begin packing up for home, when the hen bird suddenly arrived. After that the bird came to the nest readily enough, and some good photographs were obtained. It is an annoying bird to photograph. Food seems to be obtained with difficulty and often at long intervals. Hence there may be interminable waiting. Whilst the young are small the hen stays at home and the cock does the foraging, as in the case of most birds of prey. He calls her when he has been successful, and she fetches the prey to the nest. Later on, as the young get stronger, the hen joins in the hunting. The young at an early age can break up food for themselves, although at first the hen does it for them very carefully. When the young ones can do this the old birds merely throw the food to them and depart. One fact about the

Hen Buzzard sitting on eggs.

We believe this is the only photograph of a buzzard incubating that has ever been taken. So shy was the bird that it was impossible to cut away the bough which makes the dark shadow across the photograph.

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young is well known, and has been frequently described, and that is the way the strongest of the young often destroys and eats his weaker brethren. They are not affectionate brothers and sisters. If one is hatched later than the other it is in consequence weaker. The stronger bully and mob the weaker continually, pecking and scuffling and trying to keep all food to themselves, even when the hen is at the nest. At last, if food is short, the weakling succumbs, and then is treated as prey by his fellow. At any rate, when one has disappeared we have seen one of his claws among the other remains in the nest.

It must be borne in mind that a young buzzard at a very early age can tear prey to pieces for himself. It would be well within his powers to rend his brother to pieces and eat him. It is astonishing how small they are when they can swallow a mouse whole.

As the young get feathers they dance and flap in the nest to exercise and develop their muscles, and when they do this their antics look extremely comical. At this stage, in addition to their antics, the down is flaking off their feathers, and they look tattered and moth-eaten.

So we leave Don Buzzardo in his fastness, secure enough for the present, but almost certainly doomed

to extinction in the future if the nation does not learn to be kinder to its birds. We pass on to another bird very like the buzzard, who may even now with luck be seen in the same districts by an eager searcher —the kite. If you see him, gaze on him with sadness. His day is nearly done, the time will soon be when his place knows him no more. I have been lucky enough to see years ago the one kite's nest then existing in our country. It contained three young ones, and sprung from that source are now living some fourteen birds. Even so, I think the end is in sight; slowly but surely they will fade away.

Once within the memory of man they were more or less common in other places. It was somewhat of a shock to us to hear an ancient Highland stalker say of the kite, " I haven't seen him for some time," as if it was but yesterday that the bird could be seen over Deeside. He described to us how their tail feathers made the best wings for salmon flies, and how he tried to get them for that purpose. " Once," he said, " we took a dead kite from a trap and cut the tail off. We threw the dead body down, when suddenly it came to life and flew away!" To such an old man those long past days were but as yesterday. Soon, as they did in the Dee Valley, they will one by one depart from us, and with many another beautiful thing they will cease to exist before the march of

progress, if progress it may be called. The unequal fight with man will be over, and the shot-gun and the trap will be triumphant. Sad it is to see him and to realise that he is holding a forlorn outpost, the sole representative of the thousands who sailed in the sky over our fields in mediæval times.

* Then London must have been like an Eastern city with the hordes of kites wheeling over it in the cool of the day, and the sound that those of our soldiery who fought in the East and went to India must know so well, the thin whistle of the kite, must have been heard everywhere. There he is, a fine great bird, wheeling over the valleys and showing red against the dark oak woods and the hillsides. His sharp-pointed wings and the long, forked tail opening and shutting as he flies will distinguish him from a buzzard at a glance. It is a fine sight, and yet there is nothing noble about this bird. He is a sneak-thief, and a scavenger. He is a bird of

* Seebohm's *British Birds*, 1883, vol. i. p. 74: "A hundred years ago the kite was one of the commonest birds of prey to be seen in Great Britain, and now it has become almost as rare as the osprey or the goshawk. All the old writers who have treated of the natural history of our islands have made reference to the wide distribution and abundance of the kite. Even in busy London laws were once in existence for its protection, the birds being so numerous there as to attract the attention of foreigners . . . . ."

Surtees' writings also contain references to the kite, showing it was still to be seen in the middle of the nineteenth century.

the kitchen-midden and a parasite on man. Not that he nowadays sits on the farmhouse roof and investigates the rubbish heap. Long years of persecution have made him wiser than that. He haunts the open for his food and lives just like the buzzard, save that dead sheep always seems to be the principal item in his bill of fare, but all is fish that comes easily to his net. Where the carcass is, there will the kites be gathered together.

However, his nest is still nearly always close to a dwelling, and unlike the buzzard is not lined with the clean growth of the earth, but with mere human rubbish—string, rags, and paper. His habits have been his undoing. He insists on living close to his sole enemy man, and occasionally leaving his favourite carrion and offal, on raiding his yard for goslings, young turkeys and chickens. It is more than man can endure, and the answer is by the gun. If our ideas of sanitation had not advanced farther than those of the Hindoo, he would have been necessary to our existence merely as a scavenger. As things are, he is of no value and is sometimes a nuisance, and so is not thought fit to survive in this material age. Those two friends to whose memory this book is dedicated spent their lives in trying to save him from extinction, and to them alone is due the fact that any still remain. Since they died we have

Young Kites.

"Gaze on them with sadness . . . the time will soon be when their place knows them no more."

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seldom been in the kite country, and have never tried to photograph the birds; they are very rare, and there have been regrettable incidents. Our presence might be suspected, and though we know the people we have preferred to keep away. The only photograph we have is the one given of the fledged young.

The pity is that nowadays the countryman considers they have a cash value, and that idea will quickly destroy the few survivors. We know that years ago an egg dealer made annual raids on the nests and sold the eggs to collectors. I wonder if the purchasers—some of them well-known names—have any pride or satisfaction in their possessions? Whatever happened in the past, I cannot believe there is nowadays a collector in existence who would be so base as to take their eggs. I know some are taken by those who have an idea that the eggs represent a king's ransom in value. Others have been taken probably by boys, who do not know what they are doing. The fact remains that you cannot mention the word " kite " to a farmer anywhere in the district nowadays without the answer being " kite . . . a very valuable bird." It is a sad subject altogether. Let us leave it with the hope that the story of the kite may weigh somewhat on the national conscience, and may help to save other raptorial birds also

within measurable distance of extinction from the same fate.

In the wild country the kite and the buzzard inhabit the commonest of the other birds is the carrion crow. He is the master of the others, although the smallest of the three. If the kite or buzzard come near the nest the crow will dart out at them and drive them off, and if they leave their eggs unattended the crow will quickly make an end of them.

He is, of course, ubiquitous; but in the kite country he is in multitudes, and nests in the alders by the brooks, in the oak woods, and in the little thorn trees on the bare hillside impartially, and sometimes even on the crags like a raven. He is a murderer, relentless as Fate, and of him little good can be said. The most that can be said for him is that he is faithful to his mate like the raven, and faces life cheerfully. I always fancy he laughs out loud when he sees a keeper with a gun. He always calls out his hoarse "ha ah! ha ah!" on such occasions. He must have a curious sense of humour, because there seems very little for him to laugh at. He is Ishmael, an outcast. Every man's hand is lifted against him, and in return he harries all creation. He can be admired for the cleverness and pluck with which he faces his enemies, and it is remarkable that he

manages to exist at all. The keeper, the shepherd and the henwife loathe him, and with reason. All try to destroy him utterly, and yet he manages to survive in almost undiminished numbers in most districts. Here and there in heavily-preserved game countries nests are few and far between. He is most numerous, of course, outside the game countries in wild hill country. A friend of ours has pointed out an interesting fact we had not noticed, that another great stronghold is in exactly the opposite type of country, namely on the outskirts of big cities. Here there is no game, and it is no one's particular interest to interfere.

From March until July crows prey incessantly on other birds, their young and eggs. You can see them on the hunt for eggs all day in the early spring, followed by peewits and other birds, who shriek wildly and try to drive them away. On the open moor you see them quartering the ground incessantly on the look-out for eggs and young. A curlew may stoop and mob them with wild cries, they merely dodge and calmly go on with their search. They are absolutely ruthless, and no efforts of the mother bird will save her treasures if the robbers find them.

One curious habit is that when they steal an egg they often carry it away and suck it near water. The

neighbourhood of a favourite pool is often covered with eggshells. One such place in Scotland that we saw would have provided a nice collection for a boy. The eggs of grouse, capercaillie, greyhen, woodcock, and black-headed gull were scattered all over the heather.

This particular larder was the work of a hoodie, and not a carrion crow. The hoodie replaces the other in the North, but is an exactly similar bird save in plumage. His body is grey, whereas the plumage of the crow is unrelieved black. If you watch him fly down with an egg you will see him suck it with every sign of satisfaction, waddle up to the water and wash his disgusting bill in it. He then takes a sip or two and flies away to get another egg.

A crippled bird of any sort is quickly done to death and torn to pieces, and any dead animal provides a feast.

There is no bird more difficult to photograph, and any picture is a prize. They have been worried and persecuted so much at the nest that it is seldom a pair will venture near the nest if a hide is put up close to it; so distrustful are they, that they will as a rule sooner desert their young than venture near.

The only way it seems possible to get a photograph

Carrion Crow and young.

"He is Ishmael—an outcast. Every man's hand is lifted against him, and in return he harries all creation."

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for certain is to try with a nest in a very remote district, where it is unlikely the old birds have ever been shot at.

A nest must be found which can be overlooked from a neighbouring tree, in which a good and sufficient hide must be placed. Provided an unsuspicious pair of birds is found there will not be much difficulty in getting a picture. It all depends on the birds themselves. The photograph here given was taken without much trouble or outstanding incident because this pair of crows came readily to feed their young. The nest was far away—miles from any keeper's cottage—and the birds were absolutely without suspicion.

Even so, the carrion crow has very seldom been photographed, and I believe no photograph of the hoodie crow is in existence. Shy as the former is, the hoodie is ten times as cautious and wary, and practically will not allow himself even to be watched. He leaves his nest at sight of man and remains away indefinitely.

We had thoughts of trying to get a picture of a hoodie not long ago, but gave it up because the keepers have a habit of building a "bothy" near a nest from which to shoot the old bird. Even then the bird seldom returns until dark. The hide would look something like a "bothy,"

and we were quite certain a hoodie would not tolerate it in the district in which we were. It is a prize we mean to get in the future, but we have no illusions as to the difficulties.

CHAPTER V

THE HEATHER DWELLERS

THE CURLEW, THE GOLDEN PLOVER, THE PEEWIT, THE GROUSE, THE MERLIN, THE RING OUZEL, THE TWITE AND THE GULL

I

NOW we come to the heather dwellers, the birds that have their summer home chiefly or entirely on the open hill among the heather and the rushes. The chiefest of these, I think, is the curlew, because he is always so much in evidence in the spring. He comes up from the sea-shore in March, and his calling is the first promise of spring on the bleak moorland in the hills. In April, on a fine sunny day, if you lie out on the moor watching the birds, you will hear the curlews crying round you all day long. They are never silent, continually giving the long bubbling trill which dies away as they sink to the ground. You can hear this love song every minute, and now and then the clear musical whistle of a bird who is calling to his mate or the angry shriek of alarm. No bird is more wary. If you move a fox the curlews will tell you which way he is going, and will follow him until he gets into cover again, and when the young have hatched no dog or human being can move on the hill without

the whole world knowing the fact. He is the keeper's watch-dog, and wherever the trespasser may go he will be followed by the curlews, screaming "uch uch uch er."

When Stevenson wrote *Kidnapped* I think he forgot "the moor fowls and the peewees crying," during the flight to Cluny's cage on Ben Alder. If the red-coats had known even a little about birds Alan Breck would have hanged, whatever happened to Mr. Balfour of Shaws. The curlews would have betrayed them, for it was in early summer time.

Not only is he the keeper's watch-dog, but he is the sentry for all the other birds. Anyone who has been duck shooting on the mud flats in winter knows this fact, and many have been the curses directed at the curlew's head for spoiling a shot at better game. Besides his warning scream, he has several other notes, and above all a very fine love song. He flutters straight up into the air, and comes down like a skylark with a continuous bubbling joyous note, and goes on doing so for some minutes. This effort of his is quite distinct from the usual "curlee curlee," which gradually quickens into a wail as the bird comes to the ground. At times he flies round making a moaning sound, "coy." We cannot discover what this means, but the bird is

nearly always alone, and is probably encouraging his sitting mate.

Wary as he is, in our experience there is no bird easier to photograph, provided the hide is a good one. We have photographed several at the nest. In one case, when the bird was just on hatching, she would hardly leave the nest, and was back on the eggs before the keeper had gone two hundred yards. On another occasion, while we were putting the photographer in position, I looked up and caught sight of the curlew peeping at us with its head just over the sky-line. It was trying to keep as carefully out of sight as any sniper, but its long hooked bill caught the eye at once. When all was ready we walked down to a shepherd who was watching the proceedings a few hundred yards away, and when we got to him he told us that as we had walked off the scene so had the curlew stalked on, and that she had been on the nest some time already. On looking through the shepherd's telescope we could see the bird sitting peacefully. All curlews are not as easy as this to photograph. Some are extremely shy, but curlews' nests are common enough and easy to find, and the shy ones can be left alone. The curlew generally runs off the eggs some distance away, but very often they can be surprised round a corner, when they jump straight off the

nest. In such cases they sometimes even crouch and sit close until nearly trodden on. We have walked on to a nest when the bird sat as close as any woodcock and looked up at us. She would not leave until she was told to get out, and then flew off with a shriek. The crows harry them, and fights between the two birds can often be seen. Once a crow came and investigated a nest on which we were working. He flew round and greedily looked at the eggs, but the sight of the hide made him suspicious, and we got no photograph of a robbery.

It is curious that we have never got a photograph of the relief of the sitting bird by its mate. The nest seems never to be unoccupied, and we presume that both sexes take a share in hatching the eggs. These latter are huge eggs, as big as a turkey's, so large that you can hardly overlook the nest when you have an idea of its general situation.

When you have found it try and photograph the bird. It is a real good subject to begin on, if you find you have a bold bird to deal with. If she is shy, leave her alone and find another. With her long curved bill and long legs she will show up well on the plate and give you a picture to be proud of, perhaps you may even get a picture of the pair at the nest together, and so we leave you to it and pass on to another interesting bird.

Curlew at nest.

Facing page 102.

II

Among the heather are frequently to be found signs of man's former occupation—small patches of kindly grass, now being swallowed up into the moor again, around the ruins of a cottage. Life up there must have been a hard, bitter struggle, and the former owners have given up the unequal fight with the wild and gone to richer pastures. They are melancholy spots. You can picture the young people going out into the world to get a living, and the old couple staying at home until they died and the home fell into ruins. Politicians * often make capital out of this movement of the hillmen. However, it does not seem right that people should eke out a miserable existence in such places when there are vast spaces of rich ground elsewhere crying out for population. It was better for the original outgoers to have one sharp pang of home-sickness and then a happy life than to stay and be poor and wretched. I wonder what sort of a business any of the long-haired brigade themselves would make of life in such places? Now they are abandoned they are the favourite feeding-places of the golden plover, where he can be seen at any time. He does

* Lest any reader's political susceptibilities be offended, let us make it clear that while we may not belong to his particular party we certainly do not belong to the other two. We do not mind in the least which dog eats the other!

not nest there; his nest is on very different ground as a rule, the wet peat ground right out on the moor. In such country in early May you can hear a plaintive call, "per pee you, per pee you," and looking up, you will see the golden plover in the sky. He is then very much the bridegroom on his honeymoon, and this call is his love song. Instead of his usual flight with swiftly-beating wings, he is indulging in slow flaps, and looks as if he is imitating a night jar. A week or so later on, when the birds have settled down to a humdrum married existence, you will suddenly hear a sad little whistle, "peep," as you walk over the hill, and presently you will spot the golden plover who is making the noise. She looks very different to the bird that is seen for sale in the poulterers' shops in winter. She has on her marriage garment, a black neck and waistcoat, and very handsome she looks as she runs uneasily about in the peat ruts and mounts any little knob to look at you with obvious disfavour. Presently the cock will join in, and his plumage is brighter still. The hen has left * her eggs unseen, and the nest is somewhere near you. The question is how to find it. Sit down and watch. The birds have the patience of Job himself, and will last out your supply in an

* We have *never* known a golden plover to run off its eggs.

hour or so. They will merely run about " peeping," and nothing will make them go to the nest while you are there. Turn to and search for the nest. In an hour or two you will have realised there is a good deal of moor, and that you seem to have walked most of it flat and are no nearer in your quest. Of course, you may have the luck, as is sometimes done, of walking on the eggs by chance or flushing the bird straight off them; but it is not an easy nest to find, a fact many have discovered. There is one method by which you are nearly sure to find the nest. We do not propose to help bird-nesters, because we think they ought to have the fun of finding out methods for themselves. It is enough to say there is one vulnerable point in the bird's armour of protection. When you have found the nest you will find it contains three or four very handsome eggs. It is generally on wet ground, and your hide will be damp and uncomfortable. When you have begun to wait you will find that the golden plover can sometimes be really annoying. It will go walking about whistling mournfully and occasionally coming up to have a look at the eggs, but never coming within focus. Every minute you may think it is just coming on to the eggs, and then it will go away again. No bird can be more annoying, and yet sometimes it is as easy to photograph as any barn-

door hen. We have taken a cinematograph of a golden plover. In this case we were struck by the magnificent plumage the bird was in, and sat down to watch it. In a very few minutes she had walked straight on to the eggs within one hundred yards of us. We knew we had a really good bird to deal with, and so it proved.

When I tucked Brook in he asked me how long I thought the bird would be, and the answer was, "A quarter of an hour." He timed the wait, and he was actually turning the handle within forty-five seconds of my departure. The bird took no notice whatever of the noise, and was on the eggs within a minute.

III

From the golden plover we will pass on to his first cousin the peewit. But most people will say, "That is no dweller among the heather, he lives down on the fat cornfields." Now lately the papers have been full of letters deploring the decrease and disappearance of the peewit. To us he seems to exist in as large numbers as ever, but to have changed his quarters. He has moved uphill from the lowland on to the moors. Ask any hill-keeper, and he will tell you that vastly more peewits nest on his ground than did so twenty years ago, and

Golden Plover at nest.

"She has on her marriage garment, and very handsome she looks."

Facing page 106.

wherever you go on the hills nowadays multitudes of peewits wheel and scream round you in the nesting season. The reason which has often been advanced for this change in the bird's habits is the use of chemical manures, particularly basic slag, by farmers of late years, and this reason seems to be correct. If slag is used on a field the peewits desert it at once and nest there no longer. Their food supply must be affected, and they go elsewhere to find it, and that is where no slag or chemical is used. Nowadays the presence of the peewit on the low ground is a sign of poor land or bad farming. The people of the lowland see the peewits no longer in spring, and think they have ceased to exist, but the shepherd and the hill-keeper know better. They are on the hills in thousands from the south country to the far north of Scotland, and they can now truly be called heather dwellers.

It is amusing to watch the cocks strutting about keeping guard over their territories. If a large bird—a raven, crow or gull—flies over, up he goes in haste and chases him off the premises, and then comes back tumbling and calling as if he was proud of his prowess as a warrior in defence of his wife. The raven flies steadily on, bent on his lawful occasions, and as he goes you see peewits getting up in strings to chase him until he flies quite out

of sight. If you lose your companion on a hill expedition they are as good as the curlews at telling you where he is.

The peewit's nest is very easy to find. A very little observation of the bird will tell anyone how to do it, and many are the eggs taken to supply the market with a luxury. Even so the nests robbed are a very small fraction of the whole, and the number of eggs taken for market do not affect the numbers of the bird. It is an early nester, and eggs can be found in March. Even without man's depredations a very large number of the early nests are destroyed by crows, etc., and by snow and floods; but the bird will make many fresh attempts, and is almost certain to hatch successfully eventually.

Like all young waders, the young peewits crouch immovable on the approach of danger, with their heads flat along the ground. Pick one up and he will then run away, and it is amusing to watch him. Every few yards he will stop and bow his head right down to the ground before he resumes his move to safety. It looks as if he was regulated by clockwork, and all the time his mother will be screaming round your head, the saddest distressful cry that any bird makes.

If you pick out a good bird they are easy enough

Peewit approaching nest.

Facing page 108.

to photograph, and they make good pictures. The approach to the nest is cautious, and one has plenty of time to make ready.

IV

Although the curlew by his voice makes himself the most prominent among the moor birds in the spring, he is not the king of the heather. The grouse is the monarch, and everything on the hill is subservient to his needs. It is in his interests that many birds such as the harriers are all but shot out, and that the golden eagle is being destroyed. Whether these birds do much harm is a matter of argument and by no means certain. It is certain, however, that grouse are terrified at the sight of an eagle, and move out of his way as soon as possible.

It is curious that many sheep farmers cannot realise that sheep and grouse go together. What is good for one is equally good for the other. During the war the sheep farmers burnt the heather to such extent that very often hundreds of acres were merely bare black ground. I expect they are sorry now, and have found out what a valuable food for sheep the heather is, when properly burnt in due rotation. Owing to the careful nursing of the grouse he has increased enormously in the last century, and no

bird will respond more to encouragement. We have got so used to big bags nowadays that no comment is made. It is interesting to read the old writers on the subject of shooting. Gilbert White wrote more than a hundred years ago that the partridge swarmed to such a degree after the dry summers of 1740 and 1741 that parties of "unreasonable sportsmen" killed twenty and "sometimes" thirty brace in a day. As late as 1883 Seebohm, after saying that a good shot could bag thirty brace of grouse in a day, wrote in his usual acid, bitter style when describing the doings of others that "the noble sport of grouse shooting has degenerated into wholesale slaughter. Instead of shooting a few brace for themselves or their friends, too many owners degrade themselves to the level of bird butchers," "to obtain as big a bag as possible for the object of turning it into money or the vulgar pleasure of seeing their names in the newspapers." I wonder what our ancestors would have thought of the huge bags of the American millionaires who are so rapidly acquiring the Highlands. In point of fact, I do not suppose they have the fun that Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Wardle had with a modest bag of ten brace or so. The lunch on One Tree Hill sounds so good, and cold punch must have been a vastly better drink than cocktails, particularly when these are served by

funereal flunkeys without a trace of the geniality of Mr. Samuel Weller.

The grouse is the only bird we have all to ourselves in these islands. He exists nowhere else, although the ryper in Scandinavia must be a very near relative. His call is the same as the grouse, "urr, ut, ut, ut, ut," "go back, go back, go back," but he turns white in winter and in summer has white bars on his wings. We once found a brood of young rypers on a very small island, far out in a large lake quite a thousand yards from shore. The cock flew up with his warning shout. No waiting for him, he was off to the mainland at once. The hen flew round once or twice, but finally followed her lord and master, while the young set off for safety and lost heart when only a short distance on the way. They turned round and came back and allowed us to catch them in our hands. We could then examine them and note how very much like young grouse they were.

The grouse is a faithful husband, quite unlike those libertines his cousins the black cock and the capercaillie. He remains within a few yards of the nest while the hen is sitting and helps her with the brood, although he never sits himself. Later on when the young are full grown—some time about the middle of August—he is apt to leave his family

and live in lonely state on the hillside. He looks very handsome as he stands on a knoll on guard in springtime. The red skin over the eyes is swollen and stands in crimson patches. Once the hen has begun to sit hard you will seldom see the birds until the young are grown. There may be hundreds round you, but they will crouch down out of sight and they can only be flushed with difficulty. It is a bad sign for next season's shooting if grouse are often seen on a hill in early summer. It means there are few young birds in the heather. No eggs are handsomer with their bright red blotches and markings. The keeper likes to see well-marked eggs, for he thinks the pale ones are laid by hens sickening with disease, and if many are found he views the outlook with foreboding.

There are great difficulties in the way of getting a photograph. The keeper dislikes any interference with his charges, and with reason, for the sitting grouse is a fickle bird. She may leave her eggs altogether at the slightest disturbance, and one never knows how she will behave. If a grouse is flushed off the nest while she is laying or when she has just begun to sit, it is quite probable that she will never return. One has to proceed very carefully, and the only certain method is to be sure that the hen has been sitting for ten days or more.

Red Grouse.

She is just settling down on the eggs.

Facing page 112.

She will let you put the hide up while she remains crouching on the nest, and this must be done some days before photography is attempted. Heather is a most excellent material of which to fashion a hide, and a good one can easily be made. Even then the greatest care must be taken, and one must be prepared to abandon the whole proceeding if the bird shows any signs of suspicion whatever. She will return to the nest within twenty minutes, but no one can prophesy what her behaviour will be when she comes. Some are bold and others are very suspicious. We have a great respect for the bird's danger sense, and always exercise the greatest caution when out for a photograph.

We do not want to spoil any chance of having a covey sweeping over the butts next autumn. There is no better shooting than grouse driving, particularly when the birds have congregated in big packs, as they always do at some time in the year, about the middle of September as a rule. One interesting fact about these large packs is that they seem to consist almost entirely of young birds. An old bird is seldom shot out of a big pack of grouse, and if one is brought down it is invariably an old hen. There seems to be no place for an old cock in the big packs. I expect the old gentlemen have no wish for youthful society. The young bachelors

probably talk too much to please them. Whether the above statement will be accepted or not we do not know. It has been our experience, and one old keeper has confirmed our view of the matter. It is identical with his experience. Another good time to watch the grouse is when they are pairing. They mate very early in the year in open winters, very often early in January in the South. The cocks worry and chase the hens over the heather. There is movement and fuss all over the hills. On a fine day it is well worth anyone's while to climb up and sit watching quietly for an hour or two.

V

When on watch for birds on the moors, if you are lucky you may hear a hiss like a shell, and a small reddish-brown hawk will flash past your head, low over the heather. It is the merlin on the prowl for food, and few more beautiful birds exist. The only bird with which it is possible to confuse him is the kestrel, but he is smaller, and his flight is swifter and more direct without any sign of wavering or weakness. He passes out of sight in a few seconds, unless you are lucky enough to see him strike a small bird. He is a dainty little falcon, a long-winged

Merlin brooding young.

"Few more beautiful birds exist . . . a dainty little falcon."

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hawk built to kill in the air, and his nest is somewhere in the heather. It is true that occasionally the eggs are laid in an old crow's nest in a tree, and even, as we have found it, in a thick natural growth in a spruce fir; but this is rare, and usually the nest is on the ground. It is very difficult to find before the young are hatched, but when there are young ones it is more or less a simple matter to do so for a patient watcher. The only way we manage to find a nest with eggs is the well-known method of waiting patiently until the cock feeds his mate. Whilst she is sitting he does all the work and brings the food to her. Even then, when you have seen what you have waited for—perhaps for many hours—you may fail to find, as we have sometimes done. We once saw a cock merlin carrying prey and sat watching him, all eyes. We saw the hen fly up above the sky-line and take the food he dropped. All this took place when he was about a mile away. The exact spot from which the hen seemed to leave the heather was marked to an inch, and we strolled up thinking the finding of the nest would be an easy matter. In actual fact we searched and searched and never found. What must have happened was that the hen was hungry, and she must have left the nest and flown some distance towards her mate, all the time invisible against the dark background. We did not

happen to see her until she was above the sky-line, and so we must have marked the wrong place. Later in the day we watched a well-known site for hours. Nothing happened, and we gave up all hope and started to walk home. We had not gone ten yards when a hen merlin jumped off four eggs at our feet. We had been too near the nest the whole time for the cock to show himself. The nest off which these illustrations were taken was another such case. The nest was located to an inch as everybody thought, and yet we could not find it for a long time. Brook stood puzzled and said, "It is just here," when at the words the hen jumped up between his feet. The nest was in very deep heather and contained five eggs. The birds flew round zigzagging as they always do and shrieking. The eggs were of the usual type, so thickly covered with red pigment that they looked a very dark brown in colour. Later, when these photographs were taken and the young had hatched, the cock would strike at anyone who came near the nest most viciously. Screaming with rage, he would dive at your head like a little arrow; and though he never actually struck, yet he would make most people duck in a most undignified manner. He was a brave little bird. We have had them strike at us on other occasions and also once when they only had eggs. This took place

at the first nest we ever found. It was in Scandinavia, in a forest clearing covered with deep old heather. We had no thought of merlins being anywhere near us, when the cock suddenly appeared and made a most determined attempt to drive us away. In this case he actually pressed the attack right home, and if the person attacked did not duck he would have his cap knocked off. He actually did this twice before we found the nest.

Merlins generally are overbold with young. They disclose the presence of the nest and give the keeper the opportunity of destroying them. The keeper hates them. They are swift-flying little hawks, with a nestful of hungry young ones right among his precious grouse. It matters nothing to him what they actually kill. Their mere presence is sufficient to warrant a death sentence, and it is at once carried out. Some keepers say they have found young grouse in the nest. Our answer is, "Why do not other people see game at the nest? No one else has ever done so." We ourselves have never seen anything at the nest except small birds, mostly pipits and larks, of which there is a super-abundance, and we do not believe that merlins do a keeper any harm whatever. They kill in the air, and it is small birds and not game that they live on. They are not much bigger than a missel-thrush,

and are too small to kill game.* On one favourite bit of moorland we have at last got strict protection for the bird. The keeper has watched the nest, always made on the same heather knoll, for several years, and has satisfied himself that the hawks kill no game whatever.

Of course, in the breeding season one can easily realise that every little corpse they bring in may mean that helpless young are starving in a nest somewhere or other. It does not do to be too sentimental about birds. They themselves are the least sentimental of living creatures. If they cannot escape their enemies they are eaten, and they regard this law as justice. They do not regard such killing for food as cruel, and neither do we. What does seem cruel is to let loose an ounce and a quarter of shot with a charge of powder behind it at a little merlin trying to protect its nest. This is a villainous, cruel and useless deed, and yet landowners allow it to be done every year by their keepers, and they cannot realise that they gain nothing, in fact they actually lose something. The merlin is harmless to them, and is well worth watching.

Of course, we lay ourselves open to a charge of being merely sentimental ourselves; anyhow, we

* We are glad to see that our opinion is backed by all observers on this point.

never plead for a noxious bird, and we are ready to agree that any such birds should be " regulated " when they are a nuisance. The merlin, however, is innocent of all offence to man, and there is no reason whatever that he should be hunted down and destroyed so mercilessly.

A curious fact about the merlin is its attachment to a certain place on a moor. One or other may be shot (for years in succession) and the nest destroyed, and yet each spring a pair of merlins will return to the old place and will again make an attempt to rear their young. No bolder little bird flies, and when once the nest is found it is quite easy to photograph. The cock usually has a favourite perching-post close by, some point of vantage on which he sits when no food is required. In the case of the nest at which these photographs were obtained the cock took to the hide as soon as it was built, and used to sit on it for hours within a few inches of the photographer's head. They are most devoted parents when the young are small; the hen feeds them ever so carefully with choice bits of flesh, and swallows bones and offal herself. The young are like all hawks when first hatched, little balls of white fluff lying helpless in the heather. As they get stronger they resent disturbance and prepare to sell their lives dearly.

The prey is usually plucked ready for consumption before it is brought to the nest, and it is often impossible to tell exactly what species of small bird has been killed. Generally, however, there is a favourite place near by where the food is prepared, and here one can tell exactly what prey has been brought from the evidence of the scattered feathers. The feathers are all of small birds, mostly meadow pipits. The little hawks seem to get their prey in early morning and evening chiefly, but, like all hawks, they can do without food for a long time. When they get a meal they make a real good feed of it and gorge themselves. I hope that a landowner or two will examine the feathering place of a nesting merlin for himself, and that when he is satisfied that they do no harm the birds will be left in peace.

VI

The remaining birds to be seen nesting in the heather are the ring ouzel, and in the North the twite and the common gull, while everywhere are to be seen numbers of meadow pipits, larks, and a few stone-chats and cuckoos. The ring ouzel can be seen in summer everywhere on all our mountain ranges. He is the mountain blackbird, and leaves us in winter. He is a bird of the moorland and not of the low ground, and comes in to the hills in spring

after the curlews have arrived, some time in late March or early April, and begins to nest a month later. Old Gilbert White was very interested in the ring ouzel, and was probably the first to observe its migrations. His letters teem with references to these birds as they passed through his district in spring and autumn. His correspondents said that the ring ouzel remained with them the whole year, but they made a mistake and confused the bird with the dipper. Gilbert White was right, as he generally was.

The ring ouzel is very like a blackbird to look at, but he is slightly larger, and the great feature in his plumage is the broad white mark on his throat. As soon as he arrives in the hills the cock advertises his presence by his voice. The song is a poor imitation of a blackbird's. It sounds like the blackbird's song played on a tin-whistle and not on the blackbird's flute. It is loud and wild enough to attract attention, and if you look round you will find the songster probably perched on a stunted hawthorn bush or a stone. Food cannot be over plentiful on the high ground, and the weather is generally rough when the ring ouzel first comes to his nesting haunts, and yet he faces the storm boldly and sings away as if it was in the height of spring-time. A month later, in late April or early May, the nest will have been built and the eggs laid. The nest is generally

in the heather, very often among rocks. A favourite situation is amongst the deep heather on the steep banks of one of the little streams running down out of the moorland wherever the nest can be tucked in under overhanging herbage. The nest is exactly like a blackbird's, and so are the eggs, but these are generally much more boldly marked and blotched.

It must be remembered that the blackbird very often spends the summer in the hills, and nests here and there alongside his cousin in among rocks and heather. In such places one can never be certain that any nest which may be found is a ring ouzel's and not a blackbird's until the owner of the nest has been watched on to the eggs.

It is not an easy nest to find unless the birds are numerous, and it is curious how they change their quarters from year to year. They may be present in numbers on a certain bit of hill one year and yet the next spring they will have moved, and there will be very few pairs on the same ground, and it will probably be found that some neighbouring stretch of hill-side has been chosen in preference. The photograph is easy enough to get when the young are hatched. There is always good cover near by and a hide is easily made. The old birds are very bold near the nest, and make as much fuss as

Ring Ouzel about to feed young.

Note the abnormal white patch on her head.

Facing page 122.

any pair of missel thrushes if the young ones are looked at.

Once when we were photographing a kestrel's nest a pair of ring ouzels had young close by. They always gave us good warning when the hen kestrel was coming to the nest. They set up their loud alarm note "chak, chak," when she was quite a long way off, and yet they took no notice of the cock kestrel's approach whatever. It is not easy to tell the two kestrels apart at a glance, and it was most curious that the ring ouzels managed to do so infallibly.

The birds feed their young ones at frequent intervals, and a good series of photographs is not difficult to obtain once the nest is found. An old hen has very often quite as fine a white ring on her neck as the cock, but her plumage is not so bright. The photograph here given is of just such an old hen feeding her young. She is in fine plumage and evidently is getting grey-headed with old age; at any rate, a white patch can be seen on the top of her head. A young hen, on the other hand, is a very faded edition of her mate. The two sexes can easily be distinguished at the nest. The cock has more yellow in his bill. There is very little to impress anybody about the ring ouzel. Not very much can be written about him. He is a very ordinary person a regular man in the street, without any outstanding

characteristics, just a very ordinary carnal individual, inclined to gluttony when the bilberries are ripe. The most that can be said for him is that he is a voice crying in the wilderness, but his cry is only for a short period of the year, in April and May, and he has not much of a message to deliver.

VII

The ring ouzel can truly be called the blackbird of the mountains, and in the same way the twite is the mountain linnet. It does not, however, nest in all our mountains as the ring ouzel does, but only in the northern parts of Great Britain and particularly in Scotland. The far north of Scotland is the country to find it in. It can be seen feeding on those crofts which lie close to the heather where it makes its summer home. It is slightly larger and with a longer tail in proportion than a linnet in appearance, and has a weaker and more wavering flight. At the first glance it seems to lack the bright beauty of the linnet in breeding dress, and looks rather dingy; but if it is examined more closely it will be seen that it is a very pretty bird. There is a splendid pinky flush on its back, and the general look of its red-brown and pale brown plumage is very neat and tidy. The best identification, however, is by the bird's note, for it is very talkative, and says

" twite " very distinctly. We have kept our eyes open for the twite in many places, but have only once been in a district where the twite bred, as far as we could discover. It was in Northern Scotland, and there we found the birds in some numbers on a heather hill-side, overlooking a number of crofts. The hill-side looked down on an arm of the sea, lined with thick woods, and was a distinctly picturesque spot. The crofts lay between the thick woods and the heathery grouse ground above. The twites seemed to spend most of their time sitting on the stone walls or feeding on the crofters' cultivations, if they could be dignified by that term. The crofter, to be absolutely frank, does not cultivate soil. He merely scratches the surface. Anyhow, it seems to suit the twite's requirements in the food line, but he goes uphill to nest. He seems to like the lower hill slopes above the fields, where the heather is dotted with clumps and odd bushes of gorse.

We took up our position and watched the birds flying about for an hour or two. The Scotch crofter is a peculiar person, and his bump of inquisitiveness seems to be very highly developed. Shortly after we had begun to watch we were amazed to notice that the entire male crofter population was watching our innocent actions through telescopes. Occasionally the old woman was allowed a look as a treat. One

got a strong impression that hard work is quite unnecessary for the successful running of a Scotch croft. For two hours we watched twites and the local population watched us, and it is an uncomfortable feeling to know that a dozen unwinking eyes are directed at you through high-power lenses. At the end of that time we found a twite's nest. In the excitement of looking at the first twite's nest we had ever seen we forgot our friends down below, and bent down to examine the five eggs. It was quite enough to give the show away. When we came back two days later with the camera the eggs were gone. No doubt an intelligent crofter had lifted them, and no doubt a townsman paid cash for them shortly afterwards. He probably got them mixed up with others to make a clutch of six—as usual to obtain a high price. This nest was in a typical situation, on the ground among short heather and sheltered underneath a thick stunted gorsebush. The eggs are marked like a linnet's, but they are slightly larger and the ground colour is pale blue.

There was nothing left to do but to find another. In the course of time we found four more in almost identical situations to the first. We found two of these by watching the birds building and two by the scientific method of kicking gorse bushes and deep heather until a small bird fluttered out saying

Merlin about to feed young.

Twite at nest.

Facing page 126.

" twite." Our actions during this time were even more carefully watched than before by our friends the crofters; but we had learnt our lesson, and did not examine any nest we found. The difficulty was to circumvent our persecutors and get a photograph. We did this by using the only method we could employ, and that was by putting up the hide when the local population were otherwise engaged. I hope we shock nobody, but I fear we were compelled to do the job when everyone was in " kirk." A Scotch Sabbath can be very useful to a bird photographer, and in this case we had reason to bless the length of a Scottish sermon. The first nest we tackled was among gorse and the hide we put up was made of heather. The little hen did not like the look of it at all. She shied off the nest several times, and finally went away altogether right out of sight. We then made a hide of gorse—most horrible stuff to sit in at any time. As soon as we had done this, not only did the bird come fearlessly to the nest, but the crofters also arrived out of church. I had to take cover quickly. One old gentleman actually walked past within a yard of the hide and did not notice it! At length all were out of sight, no doubt peacefully discussing the Sunday bit of beef, and I dashed down and got Brook out of the hide in a slightly perforated condition, but triumphant with

some good photographs in his possession. We had to be content with the hen only, because we could not wait for the eggs to hatch. If we had had time to do so we should, of course, have got plenty of photographs when the pair were feeding the young. Under such circumstances as we were working the chances a photographer gets to show his skill are very few in number. However, we had to make the most of a limited time, and so took what we could get. At any rate, we got an opportunity to study the habits of that curious creature the Scotch Crofter. It made us quickly realise there are all sorts of Scotchmen, mostly good, but some indifferent. It is quite true that the Scotch are a " splendid people with the stupid English waiting over the border to be devoured," but we are quite sure that the west coast crofter does not do much devouring—even of the English. It is the east coast men who do the damage to the English. If such happen to be hotel keepers, we believe they would manage to eat up the most indigestible people with remarkable rapidity. A couple of American citizens before breakfast seem to make no difference to their appetite whatever.

VIII

Close to the twite we found another heather dweller, the common gull. Many people seem to

think that the gull which nests in great numbers on the cliffs and islands on the coast of England and Wales is the common gull. It is not so, however. The gull which is most numerous in the South is the herring gull, the bird which makes the vile laughing noises and eats filth. The common gull is the reverse of common in England during the nesting season, and has very seldom been known to nest south of the border, although it can be seen anywhere on the southern coast in winter. I believe it once nested near Carlisle; but someone took the eggs, and the bird has not tried its luck since—once was quite enough. It also likes to nest on the stony banks of burns high up in the hills. It never seems to nest on the cliffs at all. It nests on islands in fresh-water lochs for preference; but it is very fond of breeding among the heather in scattered pairs, and even here and there in small colonies. Keepers love him not at all, and we do not blame them either. It is quite a small gull, and much smaller than the herring gull, and its white plumage stands out against the dark heather in such a way that it is easy to spot it sitting on the nest. The bird then looks clean and innocent, like a little girl in a nice white dress. We have read somewhere or other a description of its plumage, that it is "dovelike." So it is; but look closer, and you will

soon see that it has a cold, cruel eye and a wicked-looking beak. There is no doubt that it is a nasty bird with evil habits, and that it is apt to prey on young birds and eggs. We have spent many hours watching the common gulls flying over the heather, and at first we were loath to believe that they were mischievous. They never seemed to be doing any damage. At last one morning, when we were watching some common gulls with a friend who knew more about them than we did, and who also hated them violently, we noticed that they were hawking and feeding on a hatch of some sort of fly. We had just got as far as saying, "There you are! There's a nice innocent bird eating insects and harming nobody," when a gull settled close to us and began pecking at something. Our friend went up to examine what the bird was doing, and presently he returned with the remark, "That bird was doing the only good thing I have ever seen a common gull do. It was sucking one of its own eggs." And it was true. We examined the nest and the eggs which had just been sucked. We soon discovered the capabilities of the common gull at egg thieving, and came to the conclusion that he was nearly, if not quite, the equal of the hoodie crow in this line of business. He will eat anything that he can find, and any egg he finds unattended is

thankfully received The bird also makes himself a nuisance at other times. If you are watching something really interesting — say a diver — you may probably suddenly hear a swish and a squeak. It is only a common gull pointing out to you that you are near its nest, and it is his way of requesting you to move on.

The bird always makes ineffectual dashes at your head under such conditions. It never presses the attack home, but sheers off with a foolish little squeak of terror or rage when it is several feet away. If you oblige this particular bird and move on you are nearly certain to get on to another bird's territory and to have the performance repeated. The birds' persistency is most annoying if you want peace and quiet. They deny you any rest until you leave the place altogether, and if you happen to be interested in watching anything in particular they will make you lose your temper most successfully. Their persistent and senseless attacks will arouse an uncontrollable desire in most people to pick up the eggs and throw them at the head of the wretched bird.

I am afraid the common gull does not improve on acquaintance. The keenest bird lover would get bored with him and his ways very rapidly. His vocal attainments are limited, but he puts them into

continuous use, and the shrieks and squeaks with which he expresses his feelings would quickly ruffle the most placid individual.

We very soon noticed that the gulls flew straight up to the nest and settled down right on the eggs. This fact excited Brook, because above all other things he enjoys working at "speed" photography, and he thought he had a chance to show his skill on the common gull. Even though he has collaborated with me in this book, I must express my personal admiration for my partner. In my eyes he is the Napoleon of bird photographers, whatever other people may think. Give him a really difficult subject and he will revel in the opportunity, however trying to the patience it may be. Speed photography —a bird in flight—he loves above everything else, and spends his time inventing wonderful shutters on his camera, about twice as quick as anything ever made before, and he makes good use of them. So we picked out a nest of the many around us and put a hide up over it. The bird did not mind in the least. As soon as we left the scene she flew straight on the eggs exactly as we wanted her to fly. Of course, we placed the hide very carefully up wind of the nest so that the bird could use the breeze and fly into it as she settled on the eggs. We gave her a good interval to get used to any change, and

Common Gull alighting at nest.

Facing page 132.

then we went back and Brook entered the hide. I retired to a distance and watched. The bird came back to the nest within three minutes, but not according to plan. The perverse brute settled most carefully on the heather yards away and walked slowly on to the nest instead of flying. I gave her ten minutes to sit, and then went down and stirred her up again. She repeated the performance. In the course of several hours we put her off the nest five times. At last she did behave as we wanted her to, and Brook got a good photograph, which we reproduce here. It is just the sort of behaviour one would expect of the common gull. I admit I dislike the bird intensely, possibly also unreasonably.

A few days afterwards we found a nest with two young ones in it. It was built on the top of a rock. Brook gazed at it with the deepest interest, somewhat to my astonishment, because there were other gulls' nests all round us at the moment. I gathered what was passing in his mind when he remarked, " That bird would *have* to fly on to the nest." So it would, for it was impossible for even a common gull to walk there. By that time, however, I was distinctly tired of the bird and I declared a strike.

I had seen quite enough of common gulls to last me a lifetime, and I had no desire whatever

at the moment to study their habits any further. However pretty they may look at the first glance, they are tiresome creatures, and over plentiful at that.

CHAPTER VI

THE FOREST

THE PIED FLY-CATCHER, THE GREEN WOODPECKER, THE GREATER SPOTTED WOODPECKER, AND THE LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER

WE are trying to group the birds which we discuss according to the places in which they live, and in this chapter we propose to discuss the birds of the thick woodland. There are not many birds which haunt the depths of the woodland. They seem not to like to live in the twilight under the dense canopy of the trees, but to prefer to live out in the sunshine of the open country. The inner parts of big leafy woods are, as a rule, rather silent, lonesome places, and one misses the companionship of many birds. In such places, however, one can find the pied fly-catcher and our three British woodpeckers, the green, the greater and the lesser spotted woodpeckers. Even these often nest outside in the open, particularly the green woodpecker, but they can all truly be called forest birds.

The first named, the pied fly-catcher, is almost, but not quite, our favourite bird. That grand old

bird, the raven, will always be the first favourite in our eyes; but the gentle little pied fly-catcher has a very warm place in our affections. It is always associated with happy spring days in our boyhood trout-fishing in Wales. The pied fly-catcher is a migrant, and comes to us very late in April or in early May, just before the boys go to school. At that splendid time of year you can hear his weak little song by the trout streams, which rush through the oak woods and alder beds. The words that I have heard put to it are "Tree, Tree, Tree, each year I come to thee." There he will be flitting about through the bare trees whose buds are just bursting into leaf. He is a pretty little bird, not merely black and white, but literally clad in purple and fine linen. His wife is not a showy or beautiful bird. She is a dowdy little person, and there is little about her to attract any attention. They are not to be found all over England. They inhabit the western districts right from the South to the North, and roughly they begin where the nightingale ends, and partly help to make up to those who live in the West for the absence of that magnificent bird.

They go on their journeyings a long way north. Not long ago we saw a pair by the sea in the far north of Scotland, where we least expected to see them.

It was like meeting old friends in a far country, and it was interesting to find them there on the east coast and not the west. By the middle of May they will all be nesting. The nest is built in some hole, generally in a tree, and is quite a neat little cup of soft material. The hole may be any height from the ground, and some nests that we have found have been low down among the tree roots, so low that they were practically in the ground itself. There is no bird which takes more readily to nest boxes if these are placed in favoured quarters. I myself have had four nests at once in boxes which I had hung up in my garden and the wood adjoining. A little girl in Wales once asked me to look at a strange bird which had made its nest in her little home-made nesting-box. I instantly guessed what the bird was, and sure enough when we opened the box we found that a pied fly-catcher had taken possession. Not only one pair were there, but all three of her boxes were occupied by other pied fly-catchers.

By the middle of May there must be a real shortage of houses for birds which build in holes. Most of the suitable ones have been seized on by tits, and so any further contributions to the housing question by human beings are thankfully accepted by a late-comer like the pied fly-catcher.

The eggs are small and very light blue, quite unspotted. They are very like the eggs of the red-start. The pied fly-catcher lays a large clutch of eggs, frequently as many as seven, and we have often seen eight in a nest. They do not vary in the slightest degree, and even the greediest collector can find no interest in getting a large series of eggs. Pied fly-catchers do not behave like their cousin, the spotted fly-catcher, which can be seen in every garden. They do not sit on the tennis net and hawk flies all through the summer day. In fact, they seldom seem to chase flies at all. They are fond of dropping into the ground to pick up food, and seem to hunt for insects and caterpillars on the trees instead of catching flies. In the photograph here given the hen can be seen bringing a fat caterpillar to the young. Caterpillars and grubs, and not flies, seem to be their favourite food.

The cock is a bold, confiding bird, but he is a silly ass, in that he will always disclose the exact position of the nest. He is an enormous enthusiast about his wife, and can never bear to be separated from her for long. If you are anywhere near the nest you will see him flitting round you and watching you uneasily. He is exactly like one of those unfortunate individuals who cannot keep a secret, and feel compelled to disclose it to the first person who comes

Pair of Pied Fly-catchers.

The cock is coming out of the hole, while the hen is waiting her turn.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker coming to nesting-hole.

Facing page 138.

along. He is obviously saying, " I 've got a secret. I have a wife, a wonderful, splendid wife, and she is sitting on eggs quite near here. I know I must not tell you exactly where, but I simply cannot help it. I must have another look at her, just one little peep." Then the silly fool flies up to the hole, clings to the bark, and looks in. He gives the whole show away completely. If you put the hen off the eggs no doubt he gets his due punishment, and has to listen to a lot of home truths. They are well merited.

When the eggs have hatched it is singularly easy to get a photograph of the birds. There are many hungry mouths to feed in the nest, and there are no short hours for the parent birds. They work hard all through the live-long summer day, and come to the nest at frequent intervals, very often arriving both together, as they have done in the photograph here given. The hen is waiting her turn to feed the young, and the cock has just finished doing so and is coming out of the hole. They are remarkably tame and confiding at this time. No hide is required for the photographer. All that is necessary is for him to keep absolutely still and avoid any sudden movement. The birds will then come and go without the slightest hesitation. They often come and cling to the bark of the tree in a way that

is all their own before they enter the nesting-hole. Anyone who watches pied fly-catchers at any time during their stay in this country is certain to grow fond of the little birds. They are so very trustful and friendly, and seem to enter into the fun and do their best to pose for the photographer. The cock is far the bolder of the two birds (perhaps he is better described as the bigger fool of the two), and he always leads the way.

Very different are the other woodland dwellers, the woodpeckers. They do not like being watched, and dodge human beings if they can, although they are not difficult to photograph.

The green woodpecker is the best known of the three. He compels attention by his shoutings. In the spring the woods echo to his laughter, loud and often repeated. He is a large and brilliantly coloured bird, green and yellow with a red crown. As he flies across the open with his undulating flight it is difficult for anyone to overlook him. All the village boys know him, and he has more country names than any other bird—yaffle, stockeakle, rain-bird and many another. In the pairing time life is just one huge joke to him. He shouts and yells with laughter incessantly. If you look for his nest, you will presently find a pile of fresh white wood chips lying on the carpet of the woods among the

Green Woodpecker leaving nesting-hole.

Facing page 140.

bluebells. They are the chips and shavings of the woodpecker's carpentry when he fashions out his home. In the tree above the chips you will see his hole, new and cleanly driven into the tree-trunk. At this time the starlings are looking for nesting-holes, and a nice new green woodpecker hole appeals to them strongly. They soon find the new woodpecker holes and quickly dispossess the rightful owner. The wood-peckers do their best, but they never seem able to put up a proper defence against the starlings. They fuss about the hole for some time, but they seem to give up the fight as soon as the starlings get any nesting material into the hole. Off they go and begin building elsewhere. Nearly all the first attempts of the green woodpecker are taken possession of by starlings; and the greater spotted woodpecker very often suffers from the same band of robbers in the same way.

The amount of chips the bird throws out of the nesting-hole is extraordinary. A great pile often collects at the base of the tree, but a large cavity is excavated in the tree below the hole. The nest is often two feet deep below the entrance hole. The bird is a good workman and cuts out her nest speedily. Whatever condition the outside of the tree may be in—whether sound or rotten—the bird will only work in soft, rotten wood. It does not mind boring

an entrance hole through sound hard wood, provided there is only a thin layer of it with soft wood in the centre of the tree. To get at this soft, rotten wood it will cut through the tough outside even of an oak tree. They are apt to make many attempts, which they abandon quickly if they cannot come across rotten wood. None of the woodpeckers makes any nest. The eggs are laid on the bare wood at the bottom of the nesting chamber. When the bird has made the nest and begun to sit it will set up a sudden hollow rumbling sound if a stick is pushed down towards it, quite enough to make a child jump. Presumably this is the bird's method of trying to drive people away—like the explosive hiss of the great tit in like circumstances. We have several times tried to find out how the bird produced this rumbling noise—watching by means of a mirror and an electric light. The bird has so far always refused to do anything when the light was turned on, and could be seen merely sitting quietly and blinking up at us. We have no idea how the noise is made. Probably the bird runs scuffling round the nesting chamber, shaking its wings violently.

The young soon tell you when they have arrived on the scene. They set up a continuous noise impossible to describe. They never cease even to draw breath, and if you darken the hole with your

hand the young think the old bird is coming and the gentle murmur increases, crescendo, to a shout. This is the time to get the photograph, and the only difficulty is to find a nest near enough to the ground level to work on. Many are high up, but they are quite common enough to wait until one is found in a suitable situation. When the hide is being put up the old bird will probably be calling uneasily near by, "plu, plu, plu, plu," but will keep out of sight.

As soon as everything is ready they will come to the nest without fear, directly someone has walked away from the hide to give them the impression that the coast is clear. We admit that we cannot tell the two sexes apart, although there is a difference between them. They fly up to the tree readily enough, but on seeing the hide for the first time they will dodge behind the tree trunk and keep peering round the corner at you until they pluck up courage. They then come hopping round and up the tree into the hole. A woodpecker cannot hang head downwards like a nuthatch. His feet are not built to enable him to do that sort of antic. He has to move upwards, and he does so in funny jerky movements. If he wants to descend the tree trunk he can only jump outwards and let himself fall until he meets the tree again, and he descends

in funny little jumps on the rare occasions that he tries to go downstairs. Getting in at the front door is easy enough for him. He climbs and squeezes himself in easily enough, the last thing you see being the stiff tail feathers which he uses as a third leg to prop himself against when climbing. Getting out is different. He cannot climb out, and his method is to squeeze out and let himself fall, when he takes wing and flies away.

We have never seen any food in the birds' mouths when they come to feed the young. Presumably they carry it in their crops and disgorge it at the proper moment. We have photographed several nests, and have never had any difficulty or incident whilst doing so. The job has been quite straightforward and not particularly interesting. We have had far more amusement watching the bird digging among the ant-hills in the open through a pair of good field-glasses.

The green woodpecker has a tremendously long tongue with a prickly ending, which he keeps in a sheath down his throat when not wanted for use. He uses it to lick up his food, and yet we could never see him use his tongue, even when he was obviously feeding on ants. We realised why we could not see it used when we had a chance to examine a tame woodpecker (of a foreign but related species),

which was a most delightful pet. The tongue of this bird moved so rapidly in and out that one could not have seen it even when only a short distance away. This bird was always extremely interested in any gold ring, and used to lick every ring with delight, his tongue moving in and out quivering like a snake's. At cheese he was a useful performer, and would soon clear a crumbled lump of cheese off the palm of one's hand, licking it up with his tongue.

The greater spotted woodpecker stays in the cover of the woodland to a much greater extent than his green cousin. He is a smaller bird, very showy in his black and white plumage. It is difficult to watch him, because if you trespass on his domain he takes quite a long time before he forgives you. He gives his alarm note, "chuck," all the while, but until the intruder has sat still for a long time he will not show himself and be watched. The nest is generally in softer wood than a green woodpecker chooses. The greater spotted woodpecker loves a birch with a nice soft rotten heart above all other trees for nesting purposes—just such a tree as is shown in the photograph. We have, however, several times found a nest in an oak tree, generally where the tree has been split and the water has entered to soften the wood. In such hard wood as

the oak, however, the nesting cavity is shallow. The greater spotted woodpecker seems to clean up an old hole for use more often than the other woodpeckers do. He is not a noisy or obvious bird like the green woodpecker, but much that has been written about the latter applies to him also. He makes the same chips, and the young make the same sort of noise as the former's do. We have, however, never heard him make the same scuffling noise in the hole. The fact is that this woodpecker sits lightly, and pops out of the hole as one is climbing the tree.

He nests as a rule—but not always—high up in a tree, and it is quite difficult to find a low nest suitable for photography. The bird is not very plentiful, and one cannot find a great number of nests to choose from. When one is found photography is easy enough, just as in the case of the green woodpecker. The greater spotted behaves in exactly the same way, hopping and jerking himself round the tree trunk. The greater spotted and his smaller relative, the lesser spotted woodpecker put up another performance in the spring. They both climb to a dead bough and drum on it with rapid taps of their beaks. It is surprising what a distance this drumming sound carries and how loud it is. It is difficult to believe that it is made

Greater Spotted Woodpecker about to leave nesting-hole.

Facing page 146.

by so small a bird. The lesser spotted woodpecker is black and white like the greater, but is very much smaller. His nesting-hole looks only about the size of half-a-crown, although it is larger. He has no great strength, and can only carve his nesting-hole out of the rottenest and softest trees. We have only found his nest in soft wood trees—the apple, birch, ash, willow and cherry. Often also he uses small, very rotten elm boughs at a great height from the ground. In fact, of all the three woodpeckers he nests the highest from the ground as a rule. The nest at which our photograph was taken was in a dead apple tree some thirty-five feet from the ground. Photography in a tree is just as easy as on the ground, but is vastly more trouble. Ropes and ladders help to make matters easier and more comfortable, but they are a nuisance to carry about on a hot day.

Being lazy, we always try to find a nest which we can deal with from the ground. In the case of the lesser spotted woodpecker this is not an easy matter. I have only found about half a dozen nests close enough to the ground in my life, and then Brook was never in the neighbourhood or was otherwise engaged. We tied the camera securely to the stem of the next tree. Brook was roped in securely and tied to the boughs above him, and a tent was thrown

over the whole outfit. The bird showed no fear at all, and came to the nest before I had moved twenty yards from the foot of the tree.

This took place in the middle of June, when the birds ought to have hatched. They have no starlings to persecute them by stealing their holes and so make them late with their nesting. Their holes are too small for the starling to use. The tree sparrow sometimes manages to steal the lesser spotted woodpecker's hole, but as a rule he is left in peace. In this case we had a good reason for believing young were in the nest, because we found a hatched egg-shell on the ground under the tree. Yet the birds were not feeding the young, and movements to and from the nest were few in number and at long intervals.

We stayed the whole day hoping that feeding would begin. Nothing happened. We only got photographs of the hen coming out of and into the hole at long intervals. Presently, however, the cock arrived. He is easily recognised, because he has a red head and the hen has not. As soon as he settled under the hole the hen seemed to know at once that he was there, and poked her head out.

We have a photograph of the two thus situated; but the hen has moved, and it is not good enough

for reproduction. She then flew away. Instantly she had gone the cock popped into the hole and took her place. He remained in the nest for an hour or more. To us this is quite good enough proof that the cock shares the incubation of the eggs with the hen, even if we do not know whether eggs or very small young were in the nest. We are told that what we saw is not sufficient proof, and that it must still remain in doubt whether both birds sit or not.

The lesser spotted woodpecker is a beautiful little bird, but he is seldom seen. He seldom comes out in the open and likes to live in the woods, generally feeding and spending his time high up in the trees. In the spring he attracts one's attention to his presence by his drumming and by his call which is a weak edition of the wryneck's "pee, pee, pee." He has a weak, fluttering flight, without the directness and speed of the other woodpeckers, and his flight is easily recognisable. Yet one seldom sees him at any time of the year, even where he is common. The result is that, although not rare, he is seldom seen, and so he is sometimes shot by that type of congenital idiot who shoots rare or unknown birds.

I have had one or two brought to me for identification as "rare" birds which had met their

end in this miserable manner. The explosion of indignation which followed seemed to cause the bringers some surprise, and I hope it did them some good.

CHAPTER VII

THE STREAM-SIDE

THE DIPPER, THE SANDPIPER, THE KINGFISHER, AND THE RED-BREASTED MERGANSER

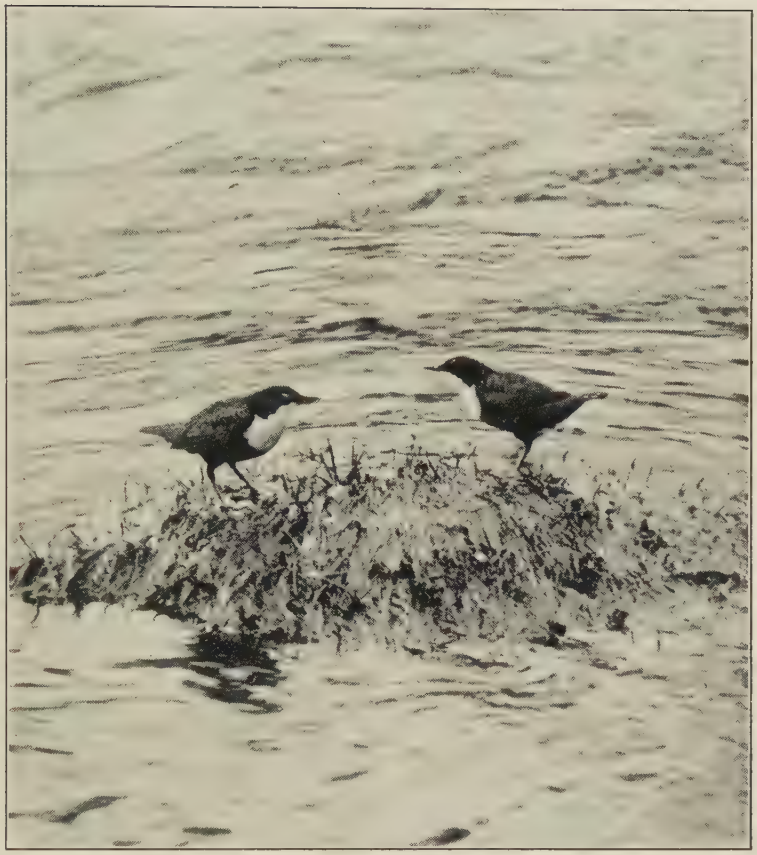
WE will now write of the trout fisherman's birds, the birds of the stream-side. We do not mean the sluggish ditches which pass as streams in many parts of the country, nor the lordly chalk-streams of southern England. We mean the little babbling brooks and rivers which rush sparkling down the valleys in hill countries, in which the trout are not mighty fat aldermen but sprightly little fellows, beneath the notice of the Hampshire man. The birds which live on such streams are the dipper and the sandpiper everywhere in the south, the kingfisher and the red-breasted merganser in the north. We really ought to have added the grey wagtail—that little bird which is called grey because it looks so very yellow, I suppose—and the goosander as a further representative of the north.

I

The grey wagtail, however, often lives elsewhere than by the stream-side; and the goosander elects to nest down holes in rocks and in tree stumps, so

we were unable to do anything with him. The friendliest of the four is, I think, the dipper. He is always with us, like the poor, and does not spend his winter abroad. The salmon fisherman on a sunny, frosty day in February, when fingers and toes feel like lumps of ice, will hear someone singing his soul out behind him. He will wonder what on earth anyone can find to sing about in such cold, and turning round, he will find it is the dipper, sitting on a rock and bobbing up and down in his usual comic way. He is a little fat, black, stumpy bird with a white waistcoat. He looks like a cheerful little gentleman of the build the doctor calls " well nourished " at inquests, one of the brothers Cheeryble, in fact. He is always restless and in a hurry, and often comes dashing past the fisherman, his short little wings working full time, remarking, " squit, squit."

He is built like an ordinary perching bird, and yet he has learnt to swim and dive very well indeed. It was because of this habit that the keepers in past days imagined he preyed on salmon and trout eggs. Therefore they used to shoot him. They have given up such foolishness, thank goodness ! He is somewhat like a wren in shape and builds a nest like a wren's, a ball of moss felted together, and generally stuck on the side of a rock, and with eaves overhanging the entrance. These eaves are evidently



Pair of Dippers.

"The brothers Cheeryble."

Facing page 152.

built to carry off flood water. The bird is fond of nesting near falls, and floods sometimes cause the water to flow down over the nest. The moss is felted together until it is practically watertight, and it can stand a good deal of water washing over it, in fact it is sometimes built behind a water-fall, but a big flood will sometimes wash the nests away.

The nest is lined with dead leaves, and usually holds four or five pure white eggs. The birds are easy enough to photograph, and we have had some amusement out of them. When we were photographing one nest and were sitting in the hide a local fisherman appeared and fished his way past us. Not only was he fishing the water by stealth and without leave, but he was also using salmon paste as bait. This is a smelly, greasy compound made out of salmon spawn, and the trout find it so irresistible that its use is forbidden by law. The hide ought to have been obvious enough, but he overlooked it. It was amusing to see his quick glances in all directions as he skirmished up the stream. We never gave him away, and he never knew what we had seen. He is dead now and out of the grasp of all water bailiffs. Another nest we sat over contained five young ones the first day and only two the second. We could not make out what happened until a disgusting old tom cat came

wandering down to the nest with obvious intent. It is difficult to realise what a fiend one's pet pussy may be when you look at her peacefully dozing on the hearthrug, but a fiend she is, and bird lovers cannot afford to keep cats. The only difficulty in photography is caused by the quickness of the bird's movements. They are never still, either bobbing up and down when they are perched, or dashing straight into the nest in a tremendous hurry. Good pictures take a long while to get, and great patience is required.

In the photograph the dipper is standing on a stone by the entrance to the nest. This is stuck on a rock in a very typical situation. The dipper is a good architect, and manages to fasten his nest securely on a very slight foundation. The projecting eaves and the entrance hole underneath can be seen. The picture gives a good idea of the bird.

II

Next on the list is the sandpiper. He arrives for the summer on the banks of the hill streams in April, and nests in early May. All through May his pipings can be heard everywhere, and he is much in evidence, flitting over the surface of the stream. Later, when there are young hiding by the stream, the old birds make a great fuss if anyone approaches the spot.

Dipper at nest.

Facing page 154.

His nest is generally close to the water, in such cover, brambles, bracken and suchlike, as he can find. Sometimes they go farther afield to make their nest. Once we saw a sandpiper fly away off dry ground a long way from water, and sat down to watch the place. In about ten minutes she came flying back, and very soon we had the satisfaction of seeing her walk on to the nest and sit down on the eggs. This nest was quite a hundred and fifty yards from water. The four eggs are very handsome, light creamy brown, covered with red-brown spots and blotches.

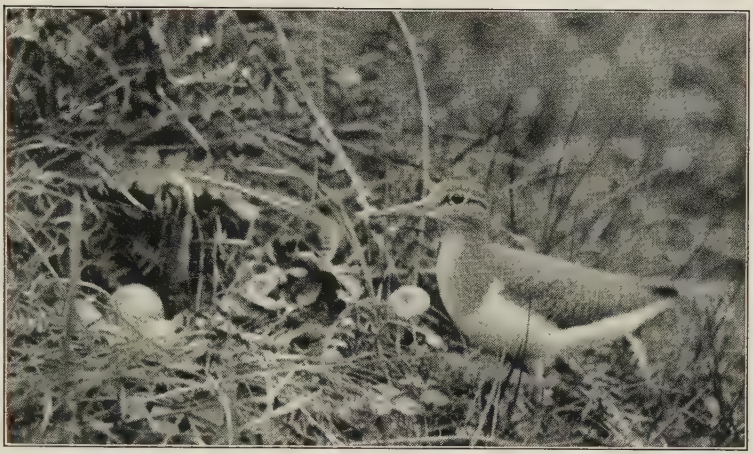
In the picture the young bracken shoots can be seen poking up through the grass and just beginning to open. The difficulty with the sandpiper is its sudden quick movement of head and tail. It jerks its head up and down nervously, and keeps jerking its tail up and down very quickly. It is trying to the patience to wait for a favourable moment when the bird is quite still. One end or the other is in perpetual movement. We had no trouble in persuading the bird to come to this nest. It was otherwise with a friend of ours, a policeman, who was anxious to take some photographs for himself. He took his day off for the business, and in the morning the bird came readily to the nest. He took all the exposures he wanted, but he found on

developing the plates at midday that they were fogged. He had not fixed the camera securely, and there had been movement. So he went back to take more photographs in the afternoon. This time the bird would have nothing to do with him. She would not come to the nest, and nothing could overcome her suspicions. The policeman had finally to go pictureless and sadly home. Birds are curious in that way. One never knows how they will behave.

It is amusing to watch wading birds like the sandpiper come to the nest. They stalk up and sit down slowly and carefully on the eggs. Then they shuffle and shake their bodies and wings to get the eggs comfortably disposed under them. Often this shuffling takes a minute or so; but at last everything is in order, and the bird sits still with a look of great satisfaction on its face. If the eggs are out of place the bird will often use its beak to push them into position again.

III

We now come to the two fish-eaters, the kingfisher and the red-breasted merganser. Everyone knows the kingfisher, the most brilliantly plumaged bird we possess. It flies up and down the river channel at great speed, a mere flash of emerald and crimson. A neighbour of mine was once



Sandpiper approaching its nest.

Kingfisher flying to its nest with a fish.

Facing page 156.

clearing out the bed of a little streamlet, standing in the water, when a kingfisher flashed round the corner and flew clean between his legs. Lovely it may be, but its habits are loathsome. The nesting-hole in the river bank becomes a mere sewer when the young have hatched, filthy and disgusting beyond all bearing. The nest is merely a round chamber lined with the fish-bone castings the bird has ejected. The myth that the British Museum will give five pounds for a kingfisher's nest intact dies hard. One still hears the story repeated constantly. The kingfisher rears a good many young ones, a nestful of seven is quite common, but the winter is a difficult time for the bird.

He must have to work hard to get his living. The minnows and small fry are deep down in the swollen streams, and the kingfisher cannot get at them. Many must die of starvation every year. The kingfisher has often been photographed. Probably more pictures have been obtained of this bird than any other. Not many, however, have been taken of the bird in flight. So swift does the bird move that most attempts only reveal a mere blur on the plate when developed. The picture given here is a good one and one to be proud of. Although the bird is in full flight, nearly every feather can be seen, and the fins on the little fish in the bird's

beak stand out clearly. While we were engaged in getting this picture a courting couple arrived and sat down close to the nest, so close that they kept the kingfisher away. They were terribly disconcerted when Brook put his head out of the hide and asked them politely to carry on elsewhere. While the kingfisher was sitting we used to get a look at her by flashing the sun into the hole with a mirror. She sat on quite contentedly. Later on, when the young had hatched, we saw her brooding them with the young ones' bills poking out beneath her breast. Everyone knows the kingfisher, and has seen him hover and plump down into the water after his prey. Little need be said of him, and so we pass on to the merganser.

IV

This is the only one of the stream-side birds which is unpopular with the trout fisher-man. It is a destructive brute and eats quantities of fish. You will notice in the photograph the long spear-like bill. It is made for fish-catching, and is notched down its whole length to enable the bird to hold fast the slippery fish it catches. The bird seems to live entirely on fish and to be very voracious.

It is remarkable what large fish it can catch. I was once fishing a river for sea trout when a merganser

came along with a family of five nearly full-grown young ones, following the same occupation as myself.

Presently the old bird caught a sea trout over a pound in weight. She tried to eat it, and kept getting a bit of it down. Then she would bring it up again, wash it and bang it about, and try to swallow it again. She kept on doing this for some ten minutes, and then gave it up as hopeless. She dropped it, but one of the young ones picked it up and went on with the job. I was fishing that stretch of water for four hours, and all that length of time one or another of the mergansers was worrying at the fish. It reminded me of the oyster in the unprintable American story (told by Mark Twain, I think).

The cock merganser is a very beautiful bird, greeny-black and white, but the hen is not pretty to look at, a dull brown bird. She has a slight crest, it can be dimly seen in the picture. There is so little of it that it only looks as if the bird had long, untidy, unbrushed hair. They nest in thick cover as a rule not far from water. The photograph here given was taken on an island. We found the nest when the hen was away feeding, and the nine eggs were covered with down. The eggs are larger and browner in colour than a mallard's. The bird does not go to the land and walk except when it is nesting.

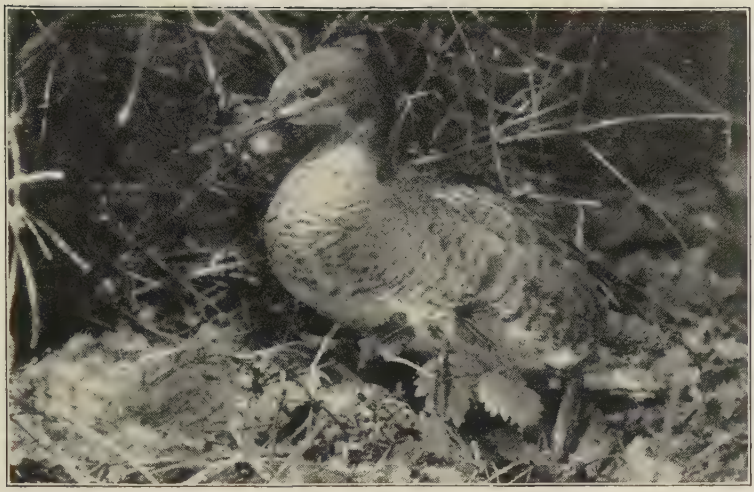
Its feet are made for diving and swimming only, and are set too far back on the body to allow for comfortable walking.

It paddles about on the ground in a comical, clumsy way. Brook's idea was that it gave a good imitation of Charlie Chaplin's walk. In my eyes the feet seemed so large that the bird looked like a flat-footed policeman.

When she got up to the eggs we learnt how she uncovered them. The down was matted together in a sort of blanket, and she pulled it back on each side carefully before she sat down on the eggs. She was slightly suspicious, and her long neck seemed to be made of rubber. She kept turning her head and neck round with snaky darts, and kept watch in all directions. We have an amusing picture of her looking straight back over her tail.

There was a colony of black-headed gulls on the island in question. Their nests were scattered everywhere on the ground, and to our amazement we found a few placed in the trees, some as high as nine and ten feet from the ground. The noise was tremendous, and the gulls gave the merganser good warning of anyone's approach. When the relief party came up the merganser had due notice of their arrival.

She did not remain sitting, but got up off



Red-breasted Merganser approaching nest.

"It gave a good imitation of Charlie Chaplin's walk."

Snipe.

Facing page 160.

the eggs and pulled the blanket of down over them. She did this very rapidly with two or three quick tugs with her beak, and then waddled off quickly to the water and dived away unseen.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WOODCOCK AND THE SNIPE

THE woodcock is generally known as the great prize of gunners in winter covert shooting, and is a fruitful cause of shooting accidents. We have all heard of the old gentleman who after having once been peppered by an over-eager sportsman for ever after used to lie down resignedly with a sigh whenever he heard a shout of "woodcock," and wait recumbent until he had heard every barrel in the party go off and it was safe for him to arise.

In one sense it is a very easy bird to photograph on the nest. No bird is a closer sitter, and anyone can walk up and take a picture of her at a few feet. A "stalked" photograph, however, is of little interest because it shows no sign of movement. Moreover, the bird is not sitting naturally. It is crouching on the nest and does not present a natural appearance. To get a good series of woodcock photographs is a very difficult undertaking. I do not think there is a shyer bird in Great Britain once it has been flushed off the nest, and I have only seen one

really good series of photographs. These were published in *Wild Life* some years ago, and were obtained by Mr. Alfred Taylor. Anyone who has tried to photograph the woodcock will understand the difficulties and congratulate Mr. Taylor on a magnificent bit of work. The woodcock as a nesting bird is generally, though sparsely, distributed in Great Britain, and it is certain that it has increased in the last fifty years.

It is very badly treated by our game laws, and can legally be shot up to March 1st. This is very unfair on the bird, because it is one of the first birds to begin nesting in this country, and nests are frequently found in March. The earliest nest we have ever heard of contained eggs within a few days of hatching on March 24th. These eggs must have been laid in the first week of March, just after the shooting season ended, and there is no doubt that the date fixed by law is much too late in the year. Of course, a good many foreign birds are still with us even as late as the end of March and early April. These latter birds would nest in the Arctic circle in late May, but it is quite a common sight to see a pair of woodcock flushed together in England as early as the end of January, and of course more frequently in February. Such birds have probably paired already, and would doubtless remain to breed

with us if undisturbed. As things are, these early nesting birds are very often shot.

Even as the law stands at present, woodcock breed every year in some numbers in the large scrub oak woods of the Hereford—Gloucester border country, and in this and other districts the local gunners are perfectly aware of the bird's love flight. On every fine night in February they are out at dusk, waiting for the poor bird to come over, and as the lines of flight are well known one can be sure that large numbers of home-breeding birds are killed. Even worse than this is the fact that a good many unscrupulous gunners carry on their sport illegally, well on into March, and do an immense amount of mischief.

This love flight of the woodcock is called "roding," and the first warning that the bird is about is provided by the remarkable froglike croak it makes as it flies. In moments of great excitement, when its mate is close at hand, the bird makes another note, a sharp "whit, whit, whit." I have heard the gunners say that the woodcock begins roding at the minute the other birds stop singing for the night. Apart from the shyness of the bird, the difficulties of good photography are increased by the usual situation of the nest. This is nearly always in the depth of the woodland, and the light,

therefore, is not good. Moreover, the eggs are generally in thick undergrowth, where a good deal of the surrounding herbage would have to be removed in order to get a clear view of the nest from the hide, and this is more than most woodcock will allow.

The nest is a neat round hollow in the dead leaves and moss. The bird does not seem to make a scratching for the nest, but merely to hollow out a cup by the pressure of her breast. The eggs, generally four in number, are large and handsome. The ground colour is about the shade of a dry oak leaf, and the egg is marked with deep brown and greyish spots and blotches.

In our case we were warned of the great difficulties we would have to overcome by a friend of ours who had made three separate attempts to photograph woodcock, and had failed on each occasion, and so we were quite prepared for trouble.

We found a very late nest (May 7th), on which the bird had been sitting for some time, and put up a large and very substantial hide over it at once. We did not flush the woodcock, nor did she at any time offer to go. All the time we were working, within a few feet of her, she never once moved and did not even blink an eyelid. We even went up to within a yard of her and took the usual unsatisfactory

stalked photograph. The hide was left in position for forty-eight hours, and then we carried out our plan.

We decided not to flush the bird, but that four of us should walk up to the hide and that Brook should be put into position, after which three of us would walk slowly away. We considered this would allay any suspicion on the part of the sitting bird. Of course, by doing this we could not hope to get a photograph of the bird walking up to the nest, but as all ground nesting birds turn their eggs at frequent intervals we hoped to get photographs of her doing this, and also of her sitting naturally. We obtained no results whatever. Brook sat motionless looking at the woodcock, and the woodcock sat frozen into stillness looking at Brook, for four hours. During this time the bird never moved a feather. This method was therefore abandoned as unsatisfactory, and we waited another two days. On this second attempt we decided to flush the bird. We did this most reluctantly, because we were not certain whether the bird would tolerate the interference. We had literally to push the bird off the nest, and after she had gone Brook waited for two and a half hours. Nothing happened whatever, and yet within half an hour after the session had been abandoned the bird had returned and was sitting as closely as

before. Something was wrong, and it could not be that the bird could see the photographer.

We examined the hide from every angle, and it was perfect. We decided that it was possible that the bird possessed a delicate sense of smell and could scent the presence of a human being. For the moment we were nonplussed and absolutely at a loss as to how to proceed. An old keeper came to us and advised us to cover the hide with some dreadful looking substance which he showed us, and with which he used to cover his vermin traps in order to hide the scent of human hands. I do not know what it was, but it gave off a most imperial stink, and I can quite believe it overcame all human scent anywhere in its vicinity. In our desperation we were actually going to follow the advice, but in the meantime the nest was destroyed by a mischievous party of children. We could follow what had happened by the marks in the soft ground. The tracks of small feet were all round the hide and led up to the nest. One of the eggs was broken and the rest were cold and deserted. Evidently the party had tried to catch the bird on the nest, and the experience was too much for the poor bird's nerves. She never returned.

It was now so late in the season that we gave up hope of finding a suitable nest. We only found

nests that had hatched out successfully in several places, when to our great joy we heard of a nest on which the bird was sitting, and found it was in quite a suitable situation.

The usual hide was put up, and we decided to make the attempt next morning. We had been told that a woodcock would not always sit closely, and that it very often ran off the eggs at the approach of danger. We decided if possible to try and make it run off, reasoning that if it ran off of its own accord it would more readily return than if it was forcibly flushed. So we first walked up noisily and looked at the nest. The bird remained sitting, and so we retired again quite out of sight. We then sat down and talked loudly. On going back to the nest we were gratified to find that the woodcock had gone, and the coast was clear for us to get to work.

Nothing happened for twenty minutes, and then we heard a loud rustling in the undergrowth. It sounded as if some large animal such as a dog was coming towards us, and it was difficult to realise that it was the woodcock itself walking home. The bird is very clumsy, and goes crashing through the dead leaves and very often tripping over any obstruction in its path. She came on unsuspiciously and we got several photographs. After she had been sitting half an hour a woodman arrived and began

Woodcock turning its eggs.

Facing page 168.

cutting down a small tree thirty yards away. It was amusing to watch the bird crouch down and then jump up and run away. She showed a surprising turn of speed, and was very soon out of sight.

In the course of the next two days we got some nice photographs, employing exactly the same means, and the bird behaved most obligingly. One evening we looked at the eggs and found that one of them was just chipping. We thought that the young would not be out of the shell until thirty-six hours later, and so timed our last visit. To our regret we found that we were too late. The family had already gone and the nest only contained the empty egg-shells. It was noticeable how the bird "froze" at the slightest noise and crouched down motionless. On one occasion the bird sat without moving within a foot of the eggs for many minutes on hearing a slight movement inside the hide. This habit and the general shyness of the bird, together with the situation of the nest, make photography very difficult, and there is no doubt we were lucky to obtain such photographs as we got.

With the woodcock we propose to take the snipe, although no two birds differ more in their habits. They seem to be coupled together in the popular estimation, but they have little in common but a

long bill and a habit of feeding at night. To begin with, the woodcock is a dweller in woodland and nests, and often feeds on dry ground, whereas the snipe loves the open swamp and marsh, and as a rule nests in the wettest places it can find. The illustration is an exception. This nest is on dry ground among heather, a very unusual situation. The woodcock will sit on the nest and allow you literally to touch it, and the only sign it will give of any intrusion will be a slight shrinking movement; whereas the snipe will jump off the eggs on your approach within ten yards or more, and will seldom allow anyone to see it sitting on the eggs. The one is as easy to photograph as the other is difficult, and it is curious that the woodcock, though a woodland dweller, never perches in trees, whereas the snipe will frequently do so during the breeding season if any bare, dead boughs are obtainable. If no such trees are present, it will perch on posts.

The woodcock will endure no disturbance whatever. Even the presence of cattle and sheep in a wood will cause it to leave for quieter quarters, while the snipe does not seem to resent the proximity of human beings. It can be seen close to houses in the East End of London, and near Manchester it frequents in some numbers and breeds

in a marshy spot surrounded by factories and the houses of the artisans.

The snipe will often nest early in the season. We have seen eggs in the last week in March. Unlike other birds, it seems to have a long nesting period, and while you find most snipe have nests in late April, you will very often find fresh eggs in June and even later. Many keepers state emphatically that both the woodcock and the snipe bring up two broods in a season, but it is doubtful whether this statement is correct. Like most birds, they both lay again very readily if their nests have come to a bad end. As they nest on the ground, many nests are destroyed by vermin, floods, and other causes, and very probably these late layings are the bird's second and third attempts at nesting.

The curious noise known as drumming made by the snipe in the breeding season is well known. Anyone who has never heard the noise has only to go in early summer to any swamp where snipe breed and put the birds up. Almost immediately will be heard a loud humming noise, like the bleating of a sheep, and looking up, the snipe will be seen flying swiftly round and round the breeding ground, and every few seconds will dive on a slant towards the earth and then remount. The drumming noise is made as the bird dives down in this manner.

There can be no doubt that both sexes drum. At any rate, if a pair of snipe are flushed together in spring and carefully watched as they fly it will be seen that both of them make the noise. At one time there was considerable controversy as to how this sound was made. It was not until comparatively recently that it was accepted that the noise is produced by the outer tail feather on each side. With a good pair of glasses, and in fact frequently with the naked eye, it can be seen that as the snipe drums these two feathers stick out at right angles to the rest of the tail; the vibration of these feathers as the air rushes past them makes the bleating noise.*

The snipe also makes a vocal noise in the breeding season which can be described as "tik ker, tik ker," continuously repeated. It makes this noise not only on the wing, but also when at rest, as for instance on a post. We believe it to be the bird's nesting note, and only uttered by the bird near its nest. It generally makes the note as it comes to earth on its return to a nest from which it has been flushed. I believe the snipe returns year after year to nest

* On the authority of Stevenson's *Birds of Norfolk*, vol. ii., pp. 316–318, it seems that this discovery was due to Mr. W. Meves, curator of the museum at Stockholm, and Mr. Meves' explanation is there given in full as a quotation from *Proceedings of the Zoological Society*, 1858, p. 199.

in the same place. This is very difficult to prove, and I admit the grounds for this assumption are slender. It is curious, however, that in 1923 I found two snipes' nests each containing four eggs of a unique type. The year after, on looking over the two places again, I found two nests containing exactly the same type of eggs, and in almost the identical places where they had been laid the year previously. As regards photography of the nest, this is quite easy provided a hide is put up some days before the attempt is made, in order that the bird may get used to any alteration in the surroundings. In twenty minutes or half an hour after the hide is occupied the snipe's " tik ker, tik ker," will be heard as it alights within sixty yards of the nest. Three or four minutes later the bird will be seen pushing its way briskly towards the nest. It looks the very reverse of a garage proprietor; its chief feature, the long bill, comes first and not last. With no hesitation, as a rule, it walks on to the eggs, shuffles them, and begins sitting. We have taken a film of the snipe when a very comic affair took place. When the snipe was shuffling the eggs its beak got caught up in the grass. It pushed and struggled until it got free again. It looked like a young officer wearing a sword for the first time and getting into trouble with it. It seems not to notice the fact that the

photographer has opened out the nest in order to get a clear view, and you can photograph it to your heart's content. Only please replace the cover when you have finished to protect the eggs from the prying eyes of crows and magpies.

CHAPTER IX

THE OYSTER-CATCHER AND THE RINGED PLOVER

THE oyster-catcher is an asinine idiot of a bird. He is black and white with red legs, an orange-red beak and a blood-red eye. He looks like a bibulous old gentleman in evening dress and his habits are mostly ridiculous. For all that, one cannot help liking the old fool. In the North he seems to enjoy nesting on bare patches of river-side shingle, preferably white or very light in colour, for the sole purpose apparently of showing up the black plumage of the sitting bird and giving away the situation of the nest. There is no nest more easy to find as a rule. On the shingle beds by the river-side you can generally spot the bird on the nest at a glance a very long way off with glasses, and as you walk nearer you will probably see it with the naked eye slinking off slowly with its head down. It looks as if it had a guilty conscience.

Nests by the river are very often placed too low to allow for any rise after rain, but the oyster-catcher never seems to learn wisdom in this respect. Dozens of nests get washed out after every spring flood, and

yet the fresh nests are generally placed in the same dangerous situation as before. We knew of one absurd bird who liked nesting on the bare gravel of a narrow carriage drive. In Wales and England it generally nests by the sea-shore on sand or rock. If you walk up to the place where you have spotted a sitting bird you will find there a shallow scratching, and instead of a lining of some soft material such as is generally used by most birds you will find that the lining consists of small stones and bits of shell. In the nest will probably be three, and sometimes four, large eggs, yellowish-brown in colour with black spots and streaks all over them. The birds will be flying round you uttering ineffectual squeaks, and will probably settle not far off, when you will see the cock trot up to the hen and obviously offer her his deepest sympathy in an absurdly fussy manner.

In fact, the oyster-catcher seems to take life very seriously indeed. He always looks worried and harassed whether he has a nest or not. We have taken photographs of this bird in two different situations. The first was in a rocky grass-field close to a keeper's house in which we were sheltering from a blizzard. We ran out and put a tent up over the nest during a break in the storm, and left it there without covering it with anything. The snow soon came on again, and the bird quickly came back to

the eggs, and there she sat for hours with the snow drifting up against her breast. At last a fine interval came and Brook got into the hide.

The old keeper who came out with us scoffed at our efforts, and could not believe that the bird would come anywhere near the tent. He was somewhat surprised when about ten minutes later, whilst we watched from the shelter of his house, the bird walked straight up to the nest without showing any suspicion whatever. She pottered round for a few minutes picking up scraps of food and then walked on to the eggs, arranged them to her liking, and sat down. As a matter of fact, the photographs in the snow were not very successful, and we had to take some more. By then the snow had disappeared. The bird was even tamer than before, and we got some quite good pictures. In the photograph here given the nest is out of focus between the bird and the camera. The eggs cannot be seen easily in the reproduction. They are in the centre of the bottom of the picture.

The second nest which we put a hide over was in a typical situation, on a broad bed of shingle on the side of a small burn. Here we had a choice of many nests. The bed of the burn was very stony and the stream, when not in flood, meandered through a wide stretch of gravel and shingle, a most popular

resort for oyster-catchers, and there were nests everywhere down the burn at intervals of about 200 yards.

We left the hide in position until the bird had got used to it, and then set out for the nest early one May morning, thinking we should get all the photographs we wanted of such an easy bird in an hour or two. The bird was sitting when we came up to the nest, and only ran about eighty yards off. Everything was got ready, and Brook was left in possession while the rest of the party hid themselves and watched the proceedings from a distance. The bird behaved in a most maddening manner. It first had a real good feed for over an hour, accompanied by its mate. It then sat on a bank within ten yards of the hide and preened itself for forty minutes. When it had finished its toilet it walked slowly towards the nest. Suddenly it stopped, and as an afterthought began to feed again, and fed straight away from the nest for another half-hour. I suppose we had been unlucky, and had begun proceedings just at the official breakfast-time. A shepherd now appeared on the scene, moving the sheep slowly on to the higher ground. Two or three sheep and lambs came along the burn-side, stopped and lay down. I thought one old ewe must have sat on the nest; but Brook says it lay down right in the picture

with its chin above the eggs, peacefully chewing. The shepherd was still some way off, and the oyster-catcher began to show signs of returning. It was a pity that it did not do so at once, because we should have got a priceless photograph.

Before the oyster-catcher got up to the nest the shepherd sent his dogs to hurry up some sheep which were lagging, and a whole crowd of them came charging up the burn and over the nest. Brook saw the eggs actually move under their feet. This disturbance was the last straw, and we went down to him. We found the eggs scattered but unbroken, and a sheep's footprint inside the nest. We replaced the eggs and tidied up the nest. It was decided to give up the attempt for the moment, and we went away to have some lunch. Whilst we were eating everything became quiet, and the oyster-catcher walked up and began to sit. It had been off the nest for nearly three hours, but wild birds' eggs seem to have an astounding vitality, and such an absence seems to make no difference to the prospects of hatching.

After giving the bird time to warm up the eggs Brook got into position. The bird behaved very differently on this occasion. Her breakfast was over, and she came back at once and was on the nest in less than a minute after everyone was hidden. Brook

took photographs of her coming on to the nest and also sitting. After watching her for some time he began to whistle. The bird merely looked round about and up in the sky to see where the noise came from. The whistling continued. The bird got off the eggs and walked very slowly for a couple of yards. It looked round in all directions, and then came back to the nest and sat down. Brook had now got all the photographs he wanted, and so continued whistling. He had to get the bird off the nest so that he could come out without giving her a shock by his sudden appearance. She now refused to move for any amount of whistling, and sat on. Finally shouting had to be resorted to, and then only did the bird move, and it looked quite angry at having to do so, and walked off sulkily.

We had expected to have finished by eleven o'clock, but actually did not do so until 3.30, when we packed up and set off home. When we had gone a couple of hundred yards we looked back and saw that the bird had already gone on the nest and was peacefully sitting. It was rather curious that the eggs were left unguarded for such a long time. Birds of the oyster-catcher type, plover, etc., seem usually to relieve each other at feeding-time, and do not like leaving the eggs unguarded. They know quite well what the hoodie crow and the gulls can do, and take

Oyster-catcher walking up to nest.

Ringed Plovers.

The cock is walking on to the eggs which the hen has just left.

Facing page 180.

measures accordingly. In fact, whilst we were watching the proceedings a lesser black-backed gull had come down within 300 yards of the oyster-catcher and demolished a wretched peewit's nest. We could see the whole performance through the glasses, and rushed down to drive the thief away. When we got there we found that the gull had already demolished every egg but one, and that one had a hole in it.

A few days later we returned to the same shingle bed. While we had been watching the oyster-catcher we had noticed a pair of ringed plovers on the shingle, and had in consequence looked for and found their nest. It was a surprise to us to see these birds in such a neighbourhood. Their nest was nearly 1,300 feet above sea-level and over fifty miles from the sea. The keepers told us these little birds had arrived fifteen years before for the first time, and had returned yearly ever since. Never more and never less than two pairs ever nested there, however many young hatched and flew. The ringed plover is by no means a rare bird, and most of them nest on the sea-shore among sand dunes or on pebble beaches all round the coasts. Here and there are favoured localities inland, such as large, sandy heaths, where they breed in some numbers, but as a rule very few breed inland at any distance from the sea. These few breed here

and there on low-lying sandy fields, rye fields for preference, and suchlike places; but it is an uncommon occurrence to find them high up and far away from the sea.

The situation in which we found this nest was the last place in which one would expect to find this charming little bird. It was high up in the Scotch hills in among the grouse and close to deer ground. The ringed plover is one of the most delightful birds to be found breeding on the sea-shore. If anyone takes the trouble to walk across any suitable area in spring he is almost sure to hear very shortly a plaintive clear note "peep." Presently he will see close to him a handsome little black and white bird running about the shingle and eyeing him with obvious uneasiness. On putting up a pair of glasses, it will be seen that the bird's appearance is greatly enhanced by the colour of the beak and legs. These are a bright orange and the beak has a black tip. The eggs are often very difficult to see among the shingle and sand. No nest is made. The four eggs lie among the sand and stones and harmonise with their surroundings extremely well. Their ground colour is very nearly that of the ground on which they lie, and they are covered with small black spots. A beginner will have great difficulty in seeing them. If there are young birds lying among the shingle

the old birds put up a very fine demonstration of the broken wing trick in order to draw the trespasser away. They will lie down on their sides, feebly waving a wing as if they were mortally wounded and at the point of death. It is comic to see them keep just in front of a terrier until they have drawn him away to a safe distance. When this performance is not heeded they often run round and round extremely fast, their little legs fairly twinkling, and their distress is pitiable. Like most wading birds, they have a love flight and a very charming one. The cock flaps round and round in figures of eight and circles with a much slower wing beat than is usual, trilling incessantly the whole time. He works himself up into absolute ecstasy, and behaves as if he was saying, " I 'm in love, and I don't care who knows it." It is a most attractive performance, and like most things the ringed plover does, well worth watching. They attract everybody, and as they are very easy to photograph at the nest, many fine photographs have been obtained by various persons. In our case we had placed a dummy hide of rushes over the nest some days before, and before going away had watched the bird on the nest in order to make sure the disturbance of her surroundings had not been too much for her. We therefore did not anticipate much difficulty, and we were not deceived.

The hide was occupied for four and a half hours, and the hen returned within a few minutes after the assistants were out of sight.

The hen seemed to us to be lighter in colour and easily distinguishable from the cock. There seemed to be less black about her, although the sexes are alike in plumage. The ringed plover runs on and off the nest very quickly, and it is difficult to get a photograph of her approaching the nest. In this case the hen at first seemed to be slightly perturbed at the sight of a larger heap of rushes. She walked round bobbing her head up and down as they always seem to do when puzzled, but in a minute or two she decided everything was in order, and was on the eggs with a quick run. She sat for an hour looking sleepy and bored. Then just as a photograph was about to be taken of her in this position she gave a low call.

Events took place then with remarkable rapidity, and we were lucky to get a photograph at all. The cock came up to the nest with a run, and on his arrival the hen got up off the eggs and walked away. She began to feed instantly she was off the nest, and the cock took her place as soon as she rose. In the photograph which we took of this change-over the hen's head is turned towards the cock as if she was saying, " Late as usual." It was

her supper-time, and she took three hours over it. The cock sat on looking sleepy and far more bored than the hen seemed over the business. After he had been sitting an hour he gave a yawn, rose up from the eggs, and walked off. He abandoned his post, and although he remained in the neighbourhood of the nest, he never resumed his duties. The eggs were left unattended for two hours or more and got quite cold. At the end of the time the hen came back and began sitting.

The more we see of birds the more we notice how little the male bird seems to help his mate, with very few exceptions. If the cock does anything at all to help he seems to do it with unwillingness and ill grace, as in this case. The cock ringed plover sat with boredom written all over him. You could see that he hated the job. I suppose he thought it was beneath his dignity. His wife seemed to receive this callous behaviour with indifference. In her, at any rate, he was interested, even if the family bored him.

When the hen began to sit he remained on guard close at hand, only just out of focus. Presently a pair of pied wagtails flew down on the shingle and began to feed. Innocently they walked close to the nest, and the cock attacked them jealously. He rushed up and took a running jump

at them, and continued the attack until he drove them right away. It was an amusing ending to the session, for very shortly afterwards our helpers arrived and we packed up and went away.

CHAPTER X

THE COMMON CROSSBILL AND THE LESSER REDPOLL

THE crossbill is a very charming and an interesting bird. We have seen it nesting both in England and in Scotland. Scientists inform us that we have seen two different sub-species of the same bird, the common crossbill in England and the Scottish crossbill in Scotland. The difference between the two is said to be that the bill of the Scottish crossbill is more massive than in the case of the common crossbill. Sub-species no doubt are very interesting to people in museums, who pore over fusty old skins all the day long and probably blink* every time they come out into the sunlight; but it is more than probable, in our opinion, that future generations will consider that the present-day scientist has been a bit excessive over them. We are quite willing to bet that in the year 2,000 A.D. nobody will believe that there is any difference whatever between the

* We must admit, however, that the few bird scientists we have any acquaintance with do not blink in sunlight. They look as if they could be quite handy with a golf club.

Scottish and the common crossbill. The collection of the bet will probably be difficult, but if we can be found we shall be prepared to pay quite cheerfully. However, we think posterity will award the collection of any wager to us.

At any rate, whatever the measurements of the bills of the wretched birds slaughtered in the name of science may be, the behaviour and appearance of the birds nesting in England and in Scotland does not seem to vary in the slightest degree to the ordinary eye. The two alleged sub-species admittedly mix up on migration, and it seems rather more than ordinary ignorant people like ourselves can believe that the two kinds should exist anywhere in the open air or anywhere save in museums. Let the bill measurers fight the matter out among themselves. The crossbill is called common, and it is quite a good name for it. It has nested at various times in most counties in England, and can be seen quite frequently, but at irregular intervals, in many districts in early autumn. The Scotch fir provides its chief food, and where these trees exist in any numbers the bird can be looked for. If it arrives in late summer or early autumn in large numbers and continues its stay into the winter it will probably remain to nest in the district. It is the first bird to begin nesting in this country, earlier

even than the raven. Nests have sometimes been found as early as January, and nearly all are nesting by the beginning of March. Frost and snow make no difference to them, although apparently the young ones are not as hardy as the raven, and extreme cold or snow kills them.

The cock is very handsome; in fact, he is one of the most beautiful birds we possess. The first sight of one singing on the top of a fir tree will make most people enthusiastic. He is a lovely pinkish red in colour, a delicate colour which an artist would find difficult to reproduce. The hen is also handsome, and looks like a brightly-coloured greenfinch with dark wings. It is probable that crossbills are often overlooked, even though they are striking birds in appearance. They are not large, about the size of a greenfinch, and haunt thick cover, fir trees for preference. To any observer who knows their habits, however, they leave plenty of evidence of their presence. Under the trees in which they have been feeding the ground is covered with fir cones which have been dealt with in the crossbill manner. These cones betray the presence of the birds at once to even the most careless observer. The petals of the cone are forced open from the apex downwards and the petals have a frayed look about them. The bird attacks the cones

with his extraordinary crossed bill * and extracts the seeds. We have never been able to find out exactly how he manages to tear the cones in this way. When he has finished with them they are dropped on the ground. The appearance of such cones is unmistakable. They are not ripped to pieces in the way that squirrels and woodpeckers do to obtain the seed. They lie on the ground whole, but the petals have obviously been forced open and have not opened naturally. The frayed look of the cone will attract anyone's attention at once.

When we set out to photograph the crossbill we had only seen the birds out of the nesting season. We had watched and admired them feeding on fir cones, hanging head downward like parrots, but they had never deigned to nest anywhere in our neighbourhood as far as we knew. At last we heard of a locality where they were nesting, and were told of one exact spot where they were always to be found. In addition the appearance of the gentleman who was the greatest expert on the subject was described to us. We knew most of the nests were high up in high fir-trees, and so we packed up

* There is a German legend to the effect that the crossbill was present at the Crucifixion, and that he tried to tear the nails out of the cross. It was in this manner that he obtained his pincer beak and red plumage.

ropes and everything needful and set out on a four days' adventure. We arrived in the locality without mishap, and went straight to the one place where we knew the birds always nested. It did not look very promising, nursemaids and their charges were spread about everywhere, and the British workman was very much in evidence indulging in his pursuits with the keenness and rapidity he always shows. The best thing to do, as we have always found when we are strangers in a strange land, is to sit quiet and watch. And this we did. Almost at once we saw that a gentleman of the same appearance as the expert we had heard about was engaged in the same occupation as ourselves. Taking our courage in both hands, we walked up and said in the style of "Darkest Africa," "Mister Blank, I presume." The reply was, "Certainly. How did you know?" It was quite a difficult question to answer. You cannot say bluntly to a perfect stranger, "We were told that you had certain characteristics in your appearance." However, our new-found friend had a twinkle in his eye, and so when he pressed us for information we told him what his description had been. He smiled and pointed out a cock crossbill to us. The first sight of a new bird near its nest is always exciting. It was sitting in a fir-tree, looking splendid and singing away happily,

The movement of his extraordinary beak looked very comic and not over comfortable. Unfortunately, the noise of the late upheaval caused by the Kaiser (may he boil in oil!) has left me deaf to the songs of many birds, and this was one of them. Brook says there is a greenfinchy sound about the song. Our new-found friend did more than merely show us the bird. He took us in charge, and presently showed us our first crossbill's nest in the top of a fir-tree overhanging a road. Since that day we have seen more than a dozen crossbills' nests in England and Scotland, and yet the only one we have been able to photograph has been the first. The others were all failures. Either the nests were robbed or forsaken or were in absolutely impossible situations. Two of them contained large, fully-fledged young ones, which would have left the nest and scattered as soon as anyone went near it. The crossbill's nest is generally placed in a very difficult situation, high up in a fir-tree either in the top or far out on a lateral bough. Sometimes, but not always, the camera can be suitably placed in the next tree. This was how we tackled the proposition in the case of this nest. We climbed up the tree and made a preliminary examination. We found the nest contained two eggs just on the point of hatching. The birds were astonishingly

tame. They fluttered round and nearly settled on our heads, never going more than a few yards away from the nest. It was a mere matter of seconds before we had the camera rigged up and three plates exposed. Plenty of people were passing up and down the road, and all of them were greatly interested in our actions. Very shortly the arm of the law arrived, a very stout arm of the law indeed. His girth must have exceeded his length by several feet. We were quite certain that he could never for some years past have run a burglar down, and we were equally certain that if he did happen to get his hands on one he would only have to sit on him to keep him in durance. Robert was interested also, and like all good policemen suspicious. I can see his great harvest moon of a face upturned in our direction, looking at us sitting in the topmost branches of a fir-tree. We descended and politely answered questions. It is always well to be polite to the police. We told him exactly what we were doing and offered to take a bit of film of him, telling him we were quite sure he would equal Miss Mary Pickford as a star in that line. However, he declined, and we went our respective ways, leaving Robert quaking with laughter.

We meant to return and get more photographs when the young had hatched. We were to be bitterly

disappointed. When we came back to the nest again everything was desolate. No birds were about and the eggs were cold. The nest had been pulled out of shape and the lining was disturbed. Feathers were spread about all over the fir branches, and it was plain to the eye that a tragedy had taken place. A little owl was probably the murderer. It is quite certain that they kill numbers of small birds, and they are said to be very fond of killing crossbills on the nest. The little owl is not an attractive bird, and its voice is unmusical. No one appears to be certain exactly how much harm it does, but at any rate it is an imported stranger. No one wants it, and we could get on very well without it. After this experience we liked the little owl even less than we did before, but it was no use wasting time, and we searched for another suitable crossbill's nest. We found several others, and gradually got to understand something about crossbills. The first thing that strikes anybody about the bird is its tameness. It seems to court the society of human beings, and to enjoy nesting on road-sides and among houses if there are any suitable trees.

A fir-tree in a back garden where the washing is hanging out to dry seems to be to its liking. It will allow anyone to watch it feeding within a few feet without any suspicion, and when the nest is

approached it can hardly be forced to leave the eggs. The pair will flutter all round you, and the hen will even come back to the nest at once if you keep still, however close you may be to her. Thick, closely-grown fir woods are avoided, and the bird likes to nest among thinly-scattered trees. One gradually gets to recognise the sort of place the crossbill will favour at a glance, and to find the bird quickly if it is anywhere in the district. When later in the year we were in a district hundreds of miles to the north we came across the same old crossbill trees, and there sure enough the bird was again to be seen. Even when the bird is nesting in a grove of scattered trees it will often choose the outside edge of them in which to place its nest in preference to any tree inside. Probably it is actuated in its choice of a home by its intense fear and hatred of squirrels. It nests in the sort of trees that a squirrel avoids if it possibly can. The squirrel is a cruel little beast, and likes a flesh diet for a change. He thoroughly enjoys a meal of eggs or young birds. Most nesting birds are afraid of him, and show their fear by cursing him loudly whenever he comes anywhere near a nest.

One of our friends enjoys finding crossbills' nests, but he never searches for them himself. He allows the squirrels to do the searching. As soon as one

goes anywhere near the nest the crossbills make a tremendous fuss and protestation about it. They chirp and chatter to such an extent that the commotion can be heard a long way off, and the human searcher is at once attracted to the spot by the noise. There is little of interest about the eggs. They look exactly like the eggs of the greenfinch and are much the same size. Even an expert would find it impossible to distinguish between the eggs of the two species for certain. Very small clutches are laid. Three eggs in a nest are seen very commonly, and while many birds lay four eggs, five have very seldom been found. The nest, on the other hand, is quite an interesting structure. The bird first builds an untidy, bulky platform of small fir-twigs, moss, wool and suchlike materials. They seem to sleep the night on the platform when they are building. We make this statement because in each nest that we have seen the platform of the nest is fouled with droppings. On the top of this platform is built the nest proper. It is fashioned of moss and thin soft pieces of dead grass, all carefully and neatly woven together. It is a neat cup, and often a feather or two is woven into the lining. We hope one day to make its further acquaintance, and that soon there will be another great crossbill invasion. No one has explained why flocks of crossbills should suddenly

Crossbill and nest.

Lesser Redpoll sitting.

Facing page 196.

take it into their heads to fly overseas and descend upon us. They seem to do so roughly every ten years, and can then be seen wherever there are fir-trees. At such times we have heard of foresters shooting them where fir-trees were grown by natural regeneration. They believed the birds were eating up most of the seed before it fell to the ground, and wanted to drive them away. In ordinary years few crossbills can be seen, and there is, we believe, only one district in England where they breed annually for certain. In Scotland, of course, the crossbill breeds regularly every year in fir woods, and adjoining his home we found the lesser redpoll.

We propose to describe our experiences with this delightful little bird next. It may seem curious to mix it with the crossbill. It is true that the lesser redpoll can be found nesting all over England and Wales in small numbers, and most people have probably seen it in various situations. Its favourite haunts, nevertheless, as far as we have seen, are the birch woods fringing the fir forests in Scotland, where the crossbill lives and nests. At any rate, we have nowhere else seen the lesser redpoll in such numbers. It was a frequent sight to see five or six little cocks flying about together over the birch-trees in the sunshine, their ruby foreheads shining bright as any jewel. Of course, this was later

in the year than when we saw the crossbills' nests. It was not in the frost and snow showers of March, but in the height of summer that we saw the nesting birds. They are very late in beginning to nest, and do not commence operations until very late in May or early in June. These little birds provided a very charming entertainment. They are our smallest finch and very small indeed, only slightly larger than a titmouse.

They fluttered and fussed about, chirping in the air over the birch-trees, the buds of which were just bursting into green. We watched them for an hour or two. The cocks were full of love and seemed content to spend their time telling everyone about it, whilst the hen as usual attended strictly to the nesting business. They spend a long time fashioning the cradle for the eggs and build it delicately. They begin with a little foundation of thin birch twigs and build the tiny cup on top of it. This foundation can be seen in the photograph. The nest is roughly finished outside, coarse grass and that sort of material, and the inside is moulded carefully and lined with soft white down. One little hen which we watched sat on a nearly completed nest for twenty minutes, pressing and moulding it into shape. The cock did nothing to help. He flew up to the tree when the hen arrived, and stayed

close to her doing nothing very busily. The nest generally holds five little light blue eggs with reddy brown streaks and spots on them.

After we had been watching for some time one of the party became suspicious by their movements that a pair had a nest in a stunted oak, the boughs of which were covered thick in lichen and moss. He climbed the tree, and to his joy he found the nest out on one of the boughs. It was so small and so well hidden in the moss that it was nearly impossible to see it from the ground. It was not in an easy situation for photography, being twenty feet or more from the ground. So we set about looking for another, and it took some finding. At last we discovered a nest containing five eggs in the fork of the main stem of a small birch-tree about nine feet from the ground. This was a much easier proposition. Much as we would have liked to have waited until the young had hatched, our time was limited as usual, and so we began operations at once. We tied long sticks on to the tripod legs and propped the camera up to the required height. Brook stood on a large packing case. We are not exactly dressy on our expeditions, and so when Brook stood on the box he looked in his working clothes like a modern tattered evangelist talking the mob into a bad temper. We were going to cover the whole erection with

a tent and make some sort of a hide with birch boughs, but this was absolutely unnecessary. The little hen came back to her nest long before we had finished rigging up the camera. She was accompained by the cock, and hopped about the birch-tree with him for a minute or so. She then went straight up to the nest and cuddled down on the eggs in a most confiding way while we were standing watching within six feet of her. We very soon found she was a very meek, obedient wife.

The usual state of affairs was reversed, and so far was she from bullying her husband that she was literally and in truth a cock-pecked wife. We sat down and watched while the hen went on sitting with her head turned straight towards us. The cock had gone away, and we were waiting for the official dinner-hour. We guessed that he would come back and take his wife out for a feed in the way that many if not most finches do. After waiting for an hour and a half we heard him coming back. He flew straight into the tree and hopped about calling gently to her. She took no notice whatever of his remarks. Presently he lost patience and hopped down on to the nest, and I regret to say he began pecking his wife's head. There was nothing in the love-making line about it. They were good hard bad-tempered blows, and he finally pecked her clean

off the nest. Somewhere in an ancient law book I have read that an Englishman was then entitled to chastise his wife mildly. Personally I hasten to add that it must have been only the very boldest who had the pluck to do so.

The cock redpoll acted in a very human way. With his red face he looked exactly like a little Anglo-India major full of chillies and red pepper. He said as plainly as if he had actually spoken, " Maria ! I *will* not have the dinner unpunctual. Here have I been waiting no less than three minutes," etc., etc.

We took a photograph of this incident ; but alas ! when we developed the plate we found that it was not quite good enough for reproduction. The hen flew away and was gone about twenty-five minutes. The cock accompanied her back to the nest. As far as we could make out the hen used to sit for about two or two and a half hours between each of her meals, and that when she left the nest she fed for about twenty minutes or half an hour. These are long intervals for a small bird. Many small birds of which we have timed the meal hours sit for only forty to fifty minutes at a time, and then feed for about ten. They are roughly off the eggs once every hour.

And now, gentle reader (all readers used to be gentle, and I suppose they still are), if you have

borne with our poor efforts as far as this the time has come for us to take our leave of you and depart, but first we have some requests to make. Perhaps you may be lucky enough to own or occupy broad acres. If you do, please hold your hand, even a little, and allow some of our raptorial birds to live at peace. We ask you not to destroy them all, and if you are fond of shooting, to destroy only those birds that you have satisfied yourself by personal observation do you sufficient harm to merit destruction. Please do not rely on the opinions of keepers and others, but satisfy yourself. There are no keener shooting men than we are ourselves, and yet when we see an eagle or a hawk we do not regard him as an enemy. They are such splendid birds, and a sight of them will be a delight to many people. We at any rate can lift our hats when we see them and say with honesty, really meaning it, " Good hunting, old sportsman." We realise how little harm they do. If you are a schoolboy with a brand new gun, please do not be over-eager to fire it off and murder some inoffensive bird, strange to you, just to find out what it is. We have all done that in our youth, and there are better ways of satisfying your curiosity. Learn something about birds, and do not kill them wantonly. Keep your cartridges for the wily rabbit. Our watchings and

our wanderings have given us enormous pleasure, and we can only hope that we have been able in these humble pages to pass some of the pleasure on to you—and so, farewell !

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